

# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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# NEWSLETTER FOR BIRDPWATCHERS

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## NASRAPUR REVISITED

T. Gay

In the October 1970 issue of the Newsletter I tried to describe the joys of two pleasant peaceful days at my favourite bird haunt. This year I visited the place three months later in the caldendar. Unfortunately, instead of two days, my daughter and I could only snatch five midday hours, thus missing both the early morning and late evening periods of activity. The day was pleasantly warm for December, and birds of the open appeared rather lethargic.

For me it was especially interesting to note the changes that had occurred in the birdlife, now that the luxuriant wet greenness of the Rains had given place to the faded green dryness of early winter. Nesting was of course over, pairs and family parties had split up, birds such as Painted Partridge and Spotted Dove had fallen silent, and cold weather migrants had established themselves.

Our late morning walk began to the distant tonking of a Coppersmith, the gurgling of a Jungle Crow, and the snoring of the only Spotted Dove we heard. I pointed out a Redstart

that sat on a dead stump shaking fire from his tail. Another stump served as observation post to a Rufousbacked Shrike -- a bird which, in my experience, is most often betrayed by his near-white breast and underparts. A single Egret (Small ?) stalked attendance on some browsing buffaloes. We walked straight to the stream above the high fall on the southern boundary.

A lone Pied Wagtail stood in the shade of a rock. White Wagtails and a solitary Grey were tripping slowly along the stream's margin, not far from a Redwattled Lapwing (is this the same bird as is called in Zulu by the lovely name Titi-hoya ?) which did not trouble to rise until we were very near. A small flock of Blackbellied Finch-larks fluttered down to drink at a muddy patch, close to a Rufoustailed Finch-lark. A little pale-grey bird on a rock, which faced us crouching in the manner of a dove, puzzled me until the glasses showed the long beak of a Common Sandpiper; the bird allowed us to come within ten paces before fluttering off on nervous flickering wings to the water's edge. We turned just in time to see a Whitebreasted Kingfisher drop like a turquoise thunderbolt into a pool. A peevish chatter drew our eyes to a tall pollarded trunk just in time to mark where the Spotted Owlet settled in a hollow crack overlooking the valley. From the main river far below us, where an Egret (Large ?) towered motionless in a reed-bed, a Green Sandpiper flashed up and over the waterfall with his strangely exciting whistle.

Now we crossed the stream and made for the woods beyond some grassy fields. A shrill scream drew attention to a Shikra dashing and wheeling above the tree-tops. Soft grunts and chuckles reached us from the thick crowns of a small stand of trees, and a cautious stalk enabled us to see most of the Roseringed Paroquets before they took flight. How seldom does one manage to make out all of the flock! Just when you're positive there are exactly five, a sudden whim sends them off screaming -- all seven of them. Of this flock one stayed behind, a lovely sleek collarless hen, who clambered carefully up an umbar branch, tweeting softly to herself.

The silence of the woodland path was abruptly shattered by the bubbling of a Koel, promptly answered by another bird further down the hillside. For some distance no bird was seen; and then suddenly the leafy tunnel that we were following burst into flycatchers: first a Tickell's Blue sitting on a twig above the path, then Fantails dancing from the undergrowth to the higher sprays and back again, and presently -- greatest prize of all -- a Greyheaded Flycatcher that returned again and again to his favourite bare twig. Pipits flew up to the shelter of the over-arching trees, among whose foliage tiny willow-wrens (about 4 in. long, prominent dark eye-stripe with long pale streak above it; what were they ?) jumped about like yellow-brown-grey-green mice.

Picnic lunch was eaten at ' my ' cottage amid constant interruptions, morsels being hastily put down in order to grab the binoculars every other minute. A male Verditer Flycatcher perched boldly on a branch not a dozen feet away, and after his departure a washed-out Cambridge-blue hen spend some time hopping about the bush below. A hen Iora and a Tailor bird joined the Fantail Flycatchers and willow-wrens in the trees that sheltered the cottage. Purplerumped Sunbirds probed the bauhinia blossoms high above us -- blossoms that the back-lighting sun-rays turned into a delicate Japanese painting against a blue sky flecked with small cirrus clouds. A Golden Oriole in a teak tree wrestled with a huge hairy caterpillar that drooped from her beak like a monstrous beard.

After lunch we strolled through the belt of forest in front of the cottage, where four kinds of Danaid butterfly flapped and swerved in the dappled sunshine, down to the little Manganga stream, where a startled Crow-Pheasant (the only one we saw today) dashed from the bank. A Grey Hornbill glided and swooped into a thorn-tree, where three fellow clowns awaited him. An Ashy Wren-Warbler skulked through the dead grass at the stream's edge, and a lovely little White-eye flew from the opposite bank into a bush at our feet, turning quickly away when one white-circled orb perceived us. Common Swifts wheeled in the blue overhead.

Just before the need for beating the Blackout forced us to a regrettably early departure, we were able to swell our list with Redvented Bulbul, Redrumped Swallow, King Crow, and a momentarily glimpsed skulker which I would call a Streaked Wren-Warbler. The last two observations of this First Day of War were of a dozen Blue Pigeon sitting like a flock of large clumsy swallows on a high wire, and a sooty brown bird which I can compare to nothing more nearly than to a European nightingale (what on earth was it?).

## TAILORS IN THE BACKYARD

T. Koneri Rao

A pair of Tailor birds built a nest in an Egyptian cotton plant. After completion of the nest, the female laid four eggs and started incubating. Very close to the cotton plant there was a drumstick tree whence a pair of House Crows used to perch. One day their prying eyes noticed the female Tailor bird going to the nest for incubation and this helped them to locate the nest. The crows pulled out the nest from the branch and tore it into pieces tossing the eggs over the ground. Later the female returned to the site and saw the damage caused to home and the treasures.

A day or two passed. One morning I saw the Tailors carry-



ing material into the neighbour's compound. When I peeped over the neighbour's garden, I saw a beautiful nest in a single leaf under construction. When it was almost completed one night it rained heavily with gusty winds. Next morning I saw some trees uprooted. Smaller plants and torn branchlets were strewn over the ground. I could not locate the nest. I waited for the Tailors to come to the garden. No Tailor came with material, and I concluded that something bad must have happened.

After a couple of days I saw the female Tailor carrying a load of cotton to the garden in the third house. The male too was calling lustily there. It was clear then that they had abandoned the second nest (damaged by rains) and gone to the garden in the third house to start afresh. A week passed. Female was not seen frequently. I thought the Tailor must have laid and was well settled for incubation. I hopefully thought that in another week or ten days the eggs would hatch. The probable date for hatching was already over and none of the tailors went that side with food. There was silence over the area for some days. Then one fine sunny morning I heard the male's persistent loud calls in the backyard of my house. I ignored them. But after a couple of days I went to the backyard to investigate. To my delight I saw a nest under construction in a mango sapling. They had used three leaves. The nest was completed in record time and four eggs were deposited. I did not go near the nest for the fear of drawing the attention of the pair of crows which were nesting in the drumstick tree only 12-15 feet above the Tailors.

One day I draw away an incubating crow and peeped into the Tailors' nest and found 3 young ones just hatched and an unhatched egg which hatched the next day. The parents brought smallest of the insects and perched over the rim of the nest and fed the chicks. The young Tailors started growing from pieces of flesh to dark flesh-coloured chicks. After a week they were as big as their parents but with a short tail. The colour resembled the parents' and they called like the parents when the parents delayed the supply of food. The parents were found feeding the chicks once in 2 minutes, and were never seen to go beyond the neighbouring compounds for insects.

When myself and a friend sat to photograph the birds at nest, the female called alarmingly and delayed the feed. The young ones showed concern over the delay. They often peeped over and saw the camera kept at a short distance but they never bothered. They were hungry and were always looking out for the parents to bring insects, ignoring the presence of the camera. Once or twice the female which was more nervous came near the camera to investigate. Because of the delay in feeding restlessness grew inside the nest which was overflowing with chicks. Once the male came to the nest and fed one of the chicks and left. The chick after being fed, saw the

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direction in which the father had gone. Soon it came out and flew off adventurously. Other young Tailors followed it also. The parents were not near the nest then. The female appeared and noticed that the young ones had left the nest. She at once came to the nest, peeped into it and satisfied herself that all her babies had left the nest. Cleverly the parents took all the young ones to a thick shrub. From this hidden position the young ones were fed.

In the evenings around 5.45 p.m. (Sept.-Oct.) the Tailors would plunge into our compound. They would hurriedly search for insects among the shrubs calling loudly. After this last minute search a sudden silence would prevail, the birds settling down for roosting. The female used to roost on a branch about 5 ft from the ground in a small plant. A broad leaf used to protect the roosting female from rain and predators. The male on some days roosted with the female, sitting very close to her. The four young Tailors roosted elsewhere. Around 6 a.m. the birds used to be up and call alarmingly. Then they would join the young ones to carry on their routine work.

#### THE REDBREASTED FLYCATCHER

Jamal Ara

Around September-October many small birds begin to arrive in our country, filling gardens, groves, forests and cultivation with a number of new faces and forms. One of the most conspicuous of these is the Redbreasted Flycatcher, which is extremely partial to leafy shade and makes its winter home in gardens, groves, trees surrounding houses and cultivation and light forest. Two species, the European Muscicapa parva and the Indian, Muscicapa parva subrubra are both winter visitors to the plains and plateaux of northern and peninsular India.

It is a brown little bird, smaller than the sparrow, the crown shaded with grey, chin and throat orange-red. Below the throat the underparts are white, the tail is black and white. It has a peculiar habit of cocking its tail over its back, when the white area in the tail is very distinctive, both on the perch as well as when it is spread in flight. It flicks its wings at the same time uttering a double treep-treep. This habit makes it very conspicuous even when it is inside bushes, particularly due to the sound which accompanies each flick of the tail.

It is a quiet but active bird, sitting solemnly on a perch with an intelligent expression in its large black eyes. The perch may be anything, a wire fence, a dead branch, tree-tops or electric and telegraph wires. It is a night migrant, and always arrives or leaves after dark. Immediately after arri-

val, each bird chooses a territory where it is found day after day, resenting the intrusion of others of its kind, until the time comes for the return journey, when 3 or 4 birds will assemble in every grove so far occupied by only one or two of them.

Like other flycatchers it feeds exclusively on insects which are caught on the wing by making short aerial sallies, but unlike them it also spends a good deal of time on the ground, hopping about in search of insects. From its perch it will take off suddenly, snap up a flying insect in its small flat bill and return to sit quietly as before. Sometimes it varies the routine by darting straight up into the air, closing its wings at the apex, and come fluttering down like a stone, to its perch with an insect in its beak.

It is a late riser, getting up after sunrise, and is rather crepuscular in its habits. It will feed as the dusk is fast settling down and is most active then. I timed it once and found it making 10-14 sallies per minute. But as soon as the bats begin to fly about the Redbreasted Flycatcher retires to its roost suddenly. I have said that it is a quiet bird, but if two of them should come together this habit goes. Frequently they will go after the same insect, and in the process shout at the top of their little voice. It almost seems that they are competing against each other in all spheres; catching insects, shouting, flying.

When it first arrives its throat is a beautiful vinous-red, but this disappears soon after, and for the rest of the cold weather the chin and the throat are all white. With the approach of the time for its return journey, about March, the red on the throat begins to re-appear and is fully developed just as the bird is ready to leave. But I have never known the breast to ever become red, and if I had my way, I would call it the Redthroated Flycatcher instead of Redbreasted! At least for the period it is with us. At any rate, for those of us living in its winter habitat the name is extremely deceptive and no red should be looked for when identifying this bird.

Till recently the winter homes of this bird were not very well known, and statements like 'will probably be found to winter in parts of tropical Africa', which had no relationship to facts appeared even in authoritative books. It was only just before World War II that Hart Grotz of the Berlin Museum made an extensive investigation into the migration of the European species, and proved conclusively that its migratory flights are due south to southeasterly. This means that the winter home of the European species is the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent, Burma and Ceylon. The Indian species too is confined to this area in the cold weather.

Dr C. B. Ticehurst kept notes about the migration of this bird to and from Sind, and found it to be extremely regular. It invariably arrived by the first week of October and the return migration occurred between the last week of March and the end of the second week of April. My own observations at



Ranchi (Bihar) over a period of 15 years roughly confirm these dates, but I have found that the earliest arrival took place on September 7, 1966, and the latest on October 13, 1967, but the most frequent period is the first week of October. Again the earliest date of departure recorded by me is 31.iii, in 1955, and the last is 20.iv in 1965, but here again the majority of dates are in the second week of April, though the preponderance is not so marked.

The breeding haunts of the European species extend from E. Siberia to the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea in the west. The Indian species breeds between 6000 and 8000 feet in the Himalayas, in Gilgit through Garhwal to western Nepal. The nests of both are cup-shaped structures of moss and dead leaves mixed with grass and placed in a tree hollow or against stones or tree branches; 3-5 eggs of a pale pink colour are laid.

#### AMATEUR BIRD-BANDING

K. S. Lavkumar

I always look forward to the Diwali vacations, not for the burst of crackers and displays of fireworks which I detest on account of the uninhibited noise and billowing acrid smoke, but on account of the events of Nature being enacted on all sides after the life-giving rains.

Diwali has meant to me, now for so many years, a fortnight at our ancestral home Hingol Gadh, a centuries old fort atop a sharply rising hill commanding unrestricted views over the Saurashtrian countryside, a view which has become an intimate part of my life from the earliest childhood. I think I fell in love with India as does a child with its mother growing up in the warm, compassionate and loving embrace of the parent. I lived and grew up in those early years here in unparalleled surroundings. Every person who has visited Hingol Gadh has left enchanted by the place though today it is a ghost of what it was in those earlier years when preservation was stricter and vegetation thicker and animal life plentiful. Yet, whatever little has been preserved is a joy to revisit since the ugly hand of despoilers is seen almost everywhere on travels in this fair land. Here the degradation is less and by contrast it invokes a greater joy. As a family, each of us are doing our little bit in warding off the destruction of this small dream world of ours, even if it is by coming once a year for a family reunion. During those few days, we revitalise our faith in the creed of conservation which is gaining more and more followers and we hope to be able to hold out till popular sentiment is sufficiently aroused to a point where such havens of unspoiled countryside are demanded by the populace at large and this magnificent heritage can be preserved for posterity.



Each year then, in autumn we set up some mist nets in the scrub-jungle at the base of the hill or near the headwaters of two reservoirs nearby. And carefree days are spent in the sun and fresh air, close to Nature, as close in fact as any hunter circumventing his elusive prey. Like Palaeolithic hunters of yore, we the hunters of modern times plan ways and means to ensnare our quarry -- not to kill, but to band and release. Though the end differs, giving greater human pleasures, the means have the same thrills. In capturing we satisfy our deep-seated urge to capture, overpower and to possess, by releasing after banding, we nourish the less primitive urges involving the human mind and soul!

Diwali in 1971, in the perverse manner of our Indian dates, was later by almost a month and so my Hingolghat 'season' was well after the peak of passage migration and also after the dry spell had set in and the vegetation had started folding up its display of verdure. To compensate for the drier conditions we elected to put up the nets in the course of a stream on the west of the hill. This stream is held back by a masonry dam and there is a charming little lake formed. Our work area was at the point where the lake-waters back into the ravine, and extended from there along the stream for a furlong or so.

The locale was charming. The overlying trap covers a deposit of limestone and in the geological past the same cataclysm which thrust up the hills around produced the cleft down which our little stream now flows, to cut its small gorge into the underlying limestone. The limestone soaks up the rain water like blotting paper and this water was seeping out now to flow down the stream filling crystal clear pools or to murmur across sandy shoals or slowly meander among emerald green grass. On either sides were the limestone cliffs topped by thorn trees and grass jungle; an ideal jungle setting, classic in all regards with clear cool pools flecked by sunlight percolating through the trees above, or a tingling flow over pebbles or mossy boulders, or the shimmer of the placid lake water beyond the deep shade of spreading acacias. So green and lush was this small world around me that I quite forgot the desiccated countryside a few minutes walk away and each time we left we were smitten by the barren nothingness on all sides. In this make believe world of water and vegetation we spent mornings and late afternoons of the 22nd, 23rd and 24th October.

The first day's catch was 18 birds: 11 residents, mainly Redvented Bulbuls and 7 migrants. We commenced work later than is normal because the nets had to be set up. The second day, with the nets in position, saw us working shortly after sunrise and we netted 35 captures with 25 residents (again largely bulbuls) and 10 migrants. On the third day, though work started early, the number of captures declined sharply with only 17 birds: one bulbul having got into the nets. The variety

of species was, however, the highest. We had worked with only a dozen nets. The poor catches of the third day could only be explained by the fact that the resident population had become aware of the nets and were avoiding them. For maximum effectiveness, nets should be frequently re-allocated. We, however, instead decided to sample the birds at one of the two reservoirs, and ended our work with regret in the little Eden.

Our next venue was one of the reservoirs where the waters back onto saline flats and up a shallow, sandy stream-bed. Here every morning flocks of Short-toed and Gallandrella larks come to drink in immense numbers. The congregations are at their highest at 9.00 a.m. when it is an amazing spectacle to watch birds circling and rising in tight flocks of several hundreds each, or streaming along, turning this way and that low over the fields. We strung up the nets over the water and in a haphazard manner over the fields nearby. Despite the great numbers, our catches were disappointing, but we did have the pleasure of handling a Little Ring Plover and the thrill and the immediate disappointment of having a Turremee dashing into one of the nets as it stooped after a group of fleeing larks. Had we been able to put many more nets across the flats with camouflaged poles and two strand nets, we might have had a heavy haul all within the early half of the mornings. In fact, going after these larks in a concerted manner would yield high catches.

Mist nets are not very useful in high wind and in this part of the country wind is a commodity which is available without much requesting. Infact it was because of this very factor that we decided not to work further though we had a strong inclination to spend the last few days of the vacation at my disposal in the field snaring a few more birds.

## NAL SAROVAR AND THE AHMEDABAD AREA

D. A. Stairmand

During the 2½ years I worked in Bombay I took advantage of four 'long week-ends' to do some birding in the Ahmedabad/Nal Sarovar area. I have been a little reticent to write of the wonderful birds I saw there, many of which were new to me in their natural state, as Gujarat is so well represented in the Newsletter by Lavkumar & Co. and my experience there fell pitifully short of theirs. However, the visits were so wonderful that I now feel compelled to write a few notes on them. In doing so I must admit that due to a mismanagement of packing of which, I suspect, Lavkumar himself might well be proud I am without any of my notebooks and, therefore, records of my four visits and shall have to trust in that most unreliable medium -- memory.

Nal Sarovar lies about 40 miles to the west of Ahmedaba and is a vast shallow lake surrounded by sand and very few trees. I cant say I found it attractive in itself but the birds were magnificent and there were small boats available to get good looks at them. My first two visits were made at the very end of January and February, 1969 and the other two in September, 1969 and at the end of October 1970. The best visits to Nal Sarovar -- but this comment is not necessarily applicable to the whole of the Ahmedabad area -- were the first two as Nal Sarovar is at its best from December-February when a great body of 'winter visitors' are on or around the water.

Perhaps the thing I remember most about my first visit was the vast number of duck and coot on the water. To list all these properly I would need my (unavailable) notes but I would mention the impressive Brahminy Duck (Tadorna ferruginea) standing on islets at the water's edge.

On my second visit the outstanding birds of the Nal -- the flamingoes and pelicans -- were seen in great numbers. To be out in a small boat at sunrise (there is accommodation at Nal Sarovar) and watch long lines of pelicans flying in 'Indian file' with the delicate shades of the early morning sunlight on them and then turn to watch huge flocks of flamingoes in flight with their elegant long necks elongated and displaying their finery of pink, black and white is, to me, what heaven is all about. Later in the day I saw pelicans in communal fishing -- hugely thrashing, flapping and splashing about on the water. Later still there were pelicans and flamingoes resting in a great body near the road entrance to Nal Sarovar. Also on or around the Nal were many, many other birds - storks, cranes, ibis, avocets, stilts, curlew, wagtails, wheatears, partridge, sunbirds, godwits, herons, egrets, bee-eaters -- including the Bluetailed- and Bluecheeked-, kingfishers, Neophron, spoonbills, etc., etc.

My least rewarding visit to the Nal was in September but even then there were a few flamingoes and much else. Also on that visit there were about 70 Demoiselle Cranes (Anthropoides virgo) standing in a field, with farmers working in adjoining fields, about 5 miles from the Nal off the road to Ahmedabad. The road journey to and from the Nal to Ahmedabad was always full of birds -- Sarus Cranes, White Ibis, White Storks, etc. On the September and October visits it was a joy to see several pairs of Sarus Cranes in their courtship dance or parents with immature birds and I could write much on this but, I fear, space in the Newsletter is not available for those impressions of my visits.

As you will have gathered Nal Sarovar was not the 'be all and end all' of my visits. On the September visit I fell slightly ill for one day and contented myself with a visit to Ahmedabad Zoo. It's a wonderful zoo but my main interest was in the Night Herons, Paddy Birds and various egrets feeding



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their young in the neem trees in the Zoo grounds. Incidentally, great numbers of birds fly into these trees every winter evening around about sunset -- Rosy Pastors, various mynas, parakeets, herons, egrets, etc. It is a great sight, with all the clamour and chatter. There were also huge flights of Rosy Pastors and parakeets of an evening into big trees near mosques and temples in Ahmedabad.

Just a little north of Ahmedabad one morning in October I 'notched' over 70 species of birds in one hour and these included the Kashmir Roller. The Sarkhej Road from Chandola Talao was always alive with birds and then there was Chandola Talao itself, of which something has already been written in the Newsletter. Redvented Bulbuls may be seen eating remains of bananas in the gutter in the most thriving streets of Ahmedabad. I don't think you can go wrong in the Ahmedabad area.

The weather in winter was perfect. Just hot enough from 2 to 4 p.m. to allow me an excuse for an afternoon snooze. After all, most of the birds have a nap then.

And may I say that I think Gujarati Folk Dancing (Garba) is MARVELLOUS.

#### A NOTE ON THE BEHAVIOUR OF TWO HOUSE CROWS

K. K. Neelakantan

24.vii.1968. Palghat, about 17.30 hrs. During a break in the prevalent monsoon weather, a House Crow sat on the compound wall with an air of abstraction hoping to get a few scraps from the kitchen close by. It was standing on one foot most of the time. Now and then it let down the other foot, but pulled it up almost at once. A day earlier I had noticed a common myna also doing the same thing. Both the crow and the myna always tucked up the same leg.

As I stood there, hardly ten feet away, wondering why these birds chose to give long rests to just one leg, another House Crow with noticeably ruffled plumage alighted a foot away from the first one and sidled up until it almost touched the other. It wiped the tip of its bill once or twice on the wall and took up a curious rigid pose. It thrust its bent head under the breast of the first crow and stood absolutely still. A few moments later the first crow (which had meanwhile assumed the normal two-legged stance) preened the other's crown and nape feathers. No loose feathers were seen dropping off, but the preener appeared to be eating something microscopic that had been removed from the other's plumage. The preening was done only 5 or 6 times. Then the preener took two or three steps away from the other, and resumed its reverie. But the second bird followed the other and once more went through the same



routine, i.e. it wiped its bill twice or thrice on the wall, thrust its head under the other's breast and, presenting its nape to be probed, 'froze' in that position. This dumb gesture seemed to be more effective any any cry for help, for the other bird again obliged by preening its fellow's nape - feathers four or five times. Then it moved off a couple of feet, making it clear (to me at any rate) that it was in no mood for social service. A few moments later the other moved close to the reluctant preener and repeated the old routine. This sort of thing was gone through at least six times within ten minutes. More than once, finding that the preener ignored the dumb solicitation, the other raised its head and looked pleadingly at the other. This invariably worked. But with each succeeding act of assistance, the preener's reluctance to render help kept growing. Finally the preener flew off.

The second crow (the 'preenee') was not a juvenile. I wonder whether the two crows were just casual acquaintances or a mated pair; if a mated pair, which was the male? What was it that so obviously irked the meek bird by lodging in the plumage of its hind-crown and nape? Was the second crow's bill-wiping a part of the 'language of gesture' employed in seeking the other's aid?

The crow which did the preening never once wiped its bill though it seemed to find and ingest some tiny substance.

Could the other crow's bill-wiping have been due to the presence of some minute things (organic or inorganic) at the tip of the bill also?

On subsequent days also I saw a Common Myna often standing on one leg. Since this one-leg stance is invariably noticed during spells of wet weather, I wonder whether it has something to do with heat-conservation? If so why should one myna alone regularly wish to conserve heat when others on the same wall keep both feet on the wall? Also it is very uncommon to find a myna or a crow standing on one foot. With owls, diurnal birds of prey, and the storks and herons it is habitual to stand (or perch) on one leg while resting.

#### NOTES & COMMENTS

The Editor wishes all our members a Very Happy New Year, and hopes that each of them will be able to bring in one more subscriber before the year is out.

## MINUTES OF THE 11TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE BIRDWATCHERS' FIELD CLUB OF INDIA HELD ON 19TH DECEMBER 1971

The 11th Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' Field Club of India was held at the residence of Mr Zafar Futehally, at 32-A Juhu Lane, Andheri, Bombay 58, on 19th December 1971 at 4.30 p.m., when 27 members were present.

1. Dr Salim Ali was elected the Chairman of the meeting.
2. The minutes of the 10th Annual General Meeting held on 23rd January 1971, published in the Newsletter of February 1971, were read and confirmed.
3. The Honorary Secretary gave a general report of the working of the Club. As far as the Newsletter was concerned it was making steady progress and during the current year 39 different people had written notes and articles. He thanked Mr J. S. Serrao for producing the index for Volume 12, and hoped that he would muster energy to complete an index from Volume 1 in course of time.

The Newsletter was being circulated to about 250 people of which 165 have paid their subscription. The financial position had improved since the last year, and there was a credit balance of about Rs900/- in the account. As in the past, the main expenditure of producing the Newsletter was being borne by Dynacraft Machine Co. Private Lt.

The existing office bearers of the Club and the members of the Editorial Board of the Newsletter were re-elected. Special mention was made of Mr D. A. Stairmand whose regular contributions to the Newsletter as well as his financial assistance are greatly appreciated. Mr Stairmand was retained on the Editorial Board in spite of his departure from India.

After the termination of the formal meeting, Dr Salim Ali gave a general talk on his ornithological experiences.

The meeting terminated with a vote of thanks to the Chair.

## CORRESPONDENCE

A letter from the United Kingdom

I have done a lot of birdwatching since I arrived in the U.K. in August, and the best of this was three weeks in Scotland in September, where I watched about 100 species including Black and Red Grouse, Crested Tits, Dippers, Woodcock, Gannets, Guillemots, etc., but Scotland is a bitterly cold

place in winter.

Only last week on the Essex coast I watched Bearded Reedlings for the first time. Really delightful birds. But how I miss the Indian birds!

Still, the Newsletter will keep me in touch until I can come again in person.

D. A. Stainman  
South Devon, England  
1 December, 1971

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# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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VOL XII NO. 2 FEBRUARY 1972



NEWSLETTER FOR  
BIRDPWATCHERS

Volume 12, Number 2

February 1972

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CASTAWAY WITH BIRDS

D. A. Stairmand

For many years now the BBC radio has run a programme called 'Desert Island Discs' in which a person is asked to assume that he or she is cast away alone on a desert island with rescue only a remote possibility. The 'castaway' is allowed ten records to take onto the Desert Island and required to give reasons for his or her choice. As a slight - and appropriate - variation I would like to choose ten species of birds I would have with me - assuming the almost impossible and completely horrifying possibility that no birds already existed on or visited the island - and give my reasons. I would, however, make one or two pre-conditions about the island; it must have a good lake, rivers and a varied type of habitat. And the birds would, at minimum, be pairs; in some species small parties.

1. PITTA. This delightful bird would be my first choice. Once the bird became trusting it would be a great joy to watch hopping around on the ground and digging violently into the mulch for insects all the while, with leaves flying and the Pitta keeping a dead-pan face. In its breeding season the Pitta would call from high up in the trees and at all times its colours would be flamboyant.

2. DIPPER. There is no more exciting ground bird to watch

than the Dipper as it plunges into deafening, foaming, high velocity water in mid-torrent. In more peaceful moods of evening I would watch and listen to the Dipper singing happily - if somewhat hoarsely - from a stone in mid-stream while a female would be bathing and preening herself on a nearby rock in readiness for the night.

3. OSPREY. To see an Osprey hover over water about 60 feet up, then drop and strike the water with a most tremendous splash before disappearing below the surface and then emerge a second or two later with its prey held under foot, is a great experience. A really thrilling spectacle. A pair of Ospreys used to be at Vihar Lake, Bombay, around about March and I hope they still are. If any readers in the Bombay area have never watched an Osprey fishing I suggest that they could do no better than try their luck at Vihar.

4. SPOTTED OWLET. I visited the Ghana, Bharatpur, last July and was very fortunate to stay at the Rest House and have Mr Panday for company. Adjacent to the Rest House balcony are rings on a stand - originally intended to hold potted plants. However, these rings are put to a far better use. Just on dusk electric lights are switched on around the Rest House and these attract night flying insects and, with them, a party of Spotted Owlets. The owlets use the rings as perches and these absolutely delightful birds sally to and fro from the stand all night. (I know, because I got up from bed at mid-night and 4 a.m. to continue my watching which had started at 7 p.m.) Sometimes the birds - up to 7 - descended to the ground and moved quickly to pick up insects but mainly they flew and returned to a perch with the victim held tightly in their claws. Whatever they did, they were delightful (sorry, but I just must use this word time and again) and form one of my most lasting and vivid impression of Indian birds.

5. YELLOW WAGTAIL. I had to have a wagtail - they are so beautiful in summer dress, but it was a hard decision to discard the Grey Wagtail and the Yellowheaded Wagtail. All wagtails are really lovely birds but the few Yellow Wagtails I have seen in India in summer plumage in late winter or early summer just tipped the scale in favour of this species. I make no excuses, but realise I shall probably incur the wrath of many Grey Wagtail enthusiasts!

6. COMMON GREEN BEE-EATER. A strange choice, you may say. Why not the Chestnut-headed or, more to the point, the Blue-tailed? Perhaps it is strange, but then although I know Beethoven is the greatest composer of Western Classical music my favourite composer is Delius. So my favourite Bee-eater is the Common Green - you all know it - and I shall have a party of 35 on my Desert Island, thank you. What fun they will be!

7. MALABAR WHISTLING THRUSH. It may be a bit shy but when the rainy, cloudy, stormy weather comes it will mate and build its nest and still find time to sing a lot of the day. And I can watch those marvellous flashes of cobalt against its blue-black background! I found the Himalayan Whistling Thrush a little disappointing - it's a fraction too big and sturdy and its song inferior. The Whistling Schoolboy is never disappointing.

8. PIED KINGFISHER. A very handsome bird and really the most exciting Kingfisher that one can watch for long period of time. It perches on vantage points over water with its huge bill pointed downwards like a rifle then takes off to hover over water before plunging excitingly for its prey. It does this for hour after hour and I could watch it for year after year. Sad though, that I cannot take the three-toed Forest Kingfisher, too.

9. LITTLE EGRET. Elegant, active and, above all, the most beautiful of all birds in its breeding plumage. Need I say more?

10. RACKET-TAILED DRONGO. A fascinating, intelligent and beautiful bird. With some luck I could tame it to visit my hut and rant on as Drongoes do. Always it would be at the very centre of birdlife.

So my list of ten has ended and I have had to omit personal favourites and wonderful birds such as the Flamingos, Falcons, Redstarts, Tits, Sunbirds, Swallows, Sarus Crane, Flycatchers (Paradise, Black-and-Orange, Fantail), Minivets, Pelicans and Cormorants (which could have helped me with fishing), Woodpeckers, Rollers, Orioles, Hornbills, etc. etc.

The 'Desert Islander' is usually allowed a 'bonus' and for this I'll take a bird I have never seen in the wild - the Blackheaded Sibia. The one I remember was in a large mixed aviary at Ahmedabad Zood and its colours and calls were pure delight.

I hope other readers will join in this game. - Editor and space permitting! The choices would certainly be varied.

It would seem that every individual species has qualities which would justify its inclusion in the first ten and the choice would therefore have to be very arbitrary. But Mr Stairmand has initiated an interesting game. I hope several of our readers will play it. -- Ed.



THE SPOTTED OWLET, Athene brama (Temminck)

S. V. Nilakanta

The time was about an hour after sunset. The Spotted Owllet pounced on something on the verge of the road and flew back to its favourite perch on the stay of the lamp-post. A little boy walked up slowly closer to the lamp-post to see the owllet. The owllet which was sitting with its back to the boy turned its head all the way round and stared unwinkingly at the boy. When the boy came to within about ten steps from the owl, the bird became uncomfortable and flew off to a perch on the limb of a nearby tree. Here it sat facing the boy and staring at him with its huge round eyes. It bobbed its head up and down, nodded and leaned towards the boy as if it would fall off its perch.

The antics of this little owllet which was the size of a myna with an over-sized round ball of a head, were very amusing to the boy. He in turn waved his hands at the bird which flew away with a characteristic undulating flight to a safe distance, only to return to its lamp-post perch when the boy was called home for his dinner.

The entire owllet family lived in the hole of an old mango tree and came out soon after sunset. After a few preliminary chuckles, each bird went off to its favourite perch within a radius of about 100 metres from their home. Every two hours or so they signalled to each other with a weird cacophony of chuckling, chirruping and harsh screeching sounds. One bird would start off and the others would join in the chorus of harsh raucous noise. The calls of other groups of such owllets nearby a kilometre away could be heard in the still night air. All this must have some meaning for these sociable birds but some forty years back they were just another source of amusement to the little boy when he happened to be awake.

The fact is that the clownish appearance and behaviour of owllets is not for our amusement but for making the best use of the special optical equipment with which Nature has endowed the bird.

Each eye of an owl is several times the size of its brain and proportionately much larger than in other birds. The eyes are so huge that the skull has to be considerably enlarged and modified to accommodate the eye balls - hence the big ball of a head. Both eyes are located in the front of the head and are directed forward. So the bird enjoys complete binocular vision in front, like we do. The bill is short and hooked and does not come in the way of its vision as it seems to in the case of the crow.

All other birds to a varying degree are able to see independently with each eye and can cover a very large field of view to such an extent that you cannot approach them from the back

without being noticed. Not so the owl.

The owl's field of view is restricted to the front (like crow's) and is narrow, but the image from this narrow field is wide and large and is projected on a retina of extreme sensitivity. Therefore, it sees all objects as if they are viewed through a powerful pair of binoculars. It will be noticed that the greater the power of an optical instrument the smaller the field of view.

With such a small field of view, the owl has to completely turn its head in all directions and for this purpose the neck has been provided with 14 vertebrae although the bird appears to be neckless. By nodding up and down and tilting to and fro on its perch the bird is able to cover a wider field in a vertical plane.

High magnification poses additional problems. One of them is loss of perspective. Anyone who has seen a telephoto picture of a cricket match would have noticed how the bowler, batsman and wicket keeper seem to be bunched together. With a magnification of x5 and viewing from the bowling end a batsman at 100 metres would appear to be 20 metres away and the bowler at 80 metres just 16 metres away. The distance of 20 metres which separates them appears to be reduced to 4 metres. It becomes difficult to see who is closer and who is farther away, unless one moves a little to the left or right and looks again from a slightly different view-point.

This moving of the head enables a bird or animal to produce relative movement of foreground, middle-ground and back-ground objects and helps to distinguish them in relation to each other. We who are habituated to use our reasoning power are able to see this even in a two dimensional photograph or picture. As the owl cannot use its brain to this extent and as it must eliminate all guesswork in assessing the exact range of its prey, it must move its head. If the prey or object under view moves, the same purpose is served.

The spotted owlet is entirely non-vegetarian and eats mainly beetles, crickets and such insects. The insects are often attracted by street lamps. Lizards and small toads which also come to the street lamp at night are devoured by the owlet. Mice are also eaten.

The indigestible parts of the prey such as the hard wings of beetles are torn off or brought up by the bird in the form of pellets and are rejected.

As the food of this owl is easily available throughout India, the bird has a wide distribution and is extremely common except in very heavy forest.

The housing problems of this bird are quite simple. Any hollow in a mango, peepal or such tree is used. If this is not available, hollows in buildings are welcome. Some friends of mine erected two nesting boxes in their garden, one was quickly occupied by a pair of spotted owlets and the other by a pair of Roseringed Parakeets.

Much effort is not made to line the bottom of the nest. About four white eggs are laid usually before the summer months. The eggs are round and are about 32 x 27 mm. The eggs hatch one at a time, so that the chicks are of different ages and different stages of development.

The chicks when hatched are covered with white down and later on develop the brown with white spots effect of the adult birds. The underparts are lighter in colour than the back surface. (This is usual in most creatures.)

The spotted owlet like all our owls belongs to the order Strigiformes. It belongs to the subfamily Striginae of the family Strigidae.

It is important to note that this owl is generally greyish brown and spotted with white and not barred. The facial disc is indistinct and it lacks ear-tufts.

The eyes are deep golden yellow and the feet are greenish yellow. The bill and claws are horny. The legs are completely feathered and the bird is well upholstered with down. It flies swiftly and silently on its short rounded wings. It can also hover in mid air when it sights a prey. The bird is entirely resident and non-migratory and does not require to fly long distances. The bird does not have to get its feet wet at any time and so the feathers. The underside of the toes are padded and help to grip the prey.

Sunlight does not bother spotted owlets. In fact they can be seen sunning themselves near their nest hole but crows and other birds mob them and bother them very much. Thanks to this bullying by crows, spotted owlets had to be rescued on more than one occasion. The bird is provided with very sharp predatory claws which hurt the wrist when it perches on one. That is the only time, the details of coloration can be observed properly.

**MALABAR PIGMY WOODPECKER:** Does it nest in Kerala?

K. N. Nair

According to the second edition of The Birds of Travancore and Cochin (revised title The Birds of Kerala) Dr Salim Ali does not record the Malabar Pigmy Woodpecker nesting in Kerala.

On 14.1.1970 while watching an oriole standing below a dead Cleistanthus collinus tree in Walayar Reserve Forest, a continuous drumming sound of a woodpecker attracted my attention. Closer examination revealed that it was a Pigmy Woodpecker engage in excavating a nest hole on the branch of the very tree under which I was standing. The site selected was at a height of about 40 ft. The tree itself was a little over 40 ft in height. It had lost all its main branches. The nest hole was just below a fork where the diameter of the branch will be about 3 or 4 inches.



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I visited the area on 7.i when I found both the birds engaged in the process of hammering and removing particles of wood from the hole they were boring. They worked in shifts. On resuming work, they worked very fast. The pace reduced quickly and finally the bird was seen sitting near the entrance hole with its head outside probably awaiting relief by its mate.

I kept a watch over the nest thereafter. On 25.i it was under observation from 8.10 a.m. to 9.15 a.m. At 8.10 one woodpecker entered the nest hole while the other already in the nest flew away. At 9.10 the birds again interchanged. My last visit was on 5.ii between 5.45 and 6.30 p.m. One bird entered the nest hole at 5.50, when the other already inside flew away. After feeding for some time on the branches of neighbouring trees, this bird also entered the nest hole at 6.30 p.m.

I had to be away from the place after 5.ii, and the watch could not be continued. Can this be taken as a conclusive proof that the bird is nesting in Kerala during January/February?

Another interesting thing noticed during the observations was the continuous interference by a pair of Yellowthroated Sparrows. The sparrows were seen every time the nest was visited till 25.i. The woodpeckers had to drive them away several times a day from the tree. When the woodpeckers were away, the sparrows even examined the nest hole.

Yellowthroated Sparrows also nest in similar sites. Woodpecker and barbet nest holes are said to provide coveted sites. But their nesting period is said to be between March and April. Can the interference by the Yellowthroated Sparrows be taken as a competition for a favourable nesting site?

## A VISIT TO BHARATPUR

Zafar Futehally

I was in Bharatpur between the 8th and 10th of January. I have seldom in my life been so cold as I was then. Any number of sweaters and blankets didn't seem to be enough. I admired the constitution and courage of the Mirshikars from Bihar who were working with the bird banding group of the Bombay Natural History Society and who spent 3 or 4 hours every night in the water netting waterfowl.

During my stay I listed 80 species of birds, and I will briefly comment on a few which I particularly enjoyed. If I am not mistaken the check-list for the Bharatpur Ghana Sanctuary totals 279 birds so that my list of 80 is really a rather poor one. I must go again and make it more respectable.

This is the first time I noticed what a delightful pattern on the water the coots make when they rose up to fly in a group. Their webbed feet striking the surface created ripples

immediately behind them. No other waterfowl has the same effect during the take-off.

There were groups of male Pintail Duck, their chocolate heads and grey bodies make a most attractive pattern and the females which are much less pretty were kept at a distance so as not to spoil the effect.

I got some good photographs of a Tawny Eagle sitting on a Barringtonia tree in the middle of the water, and I often heard the whistling calls of the Lesser Spotted Eagle and the very weird creaking calls of the Whitetailed Fishing Eagle.

There were a large number of shrikes on the bunds, and I am ashamed to admit my incapacity to tell the difference in the field between a Baybacked- and a Rufousbacked Shrike. I recall quite clearly what the book says, viz. that the Baybacked is the smallest shrike in India, and that it has a white mirror on the wing and its tail is graduated and is black and white. But my eyes are too poor to be able to judge between these two species even through the binoculars.

I had excellent views in the most beautiful light of the Blacknecked- and Whitenecked Storks and the Purple- and the Grey Heron.

I had my first sight of the much talked about Siberian Cranes, their dark red beaks and legs and the snow-white effect of the birds when not in flight makes a superb picture. There was one, presumably a first-winter bird, which was shaded with brown, the brown being exactly the same colour as that of the Cattle Egret in breeding plumage.

I noticed several Crow-Pheasants side by side, and I found a great deal of colour variation between the. Some were a bright chocolate-brown while others were a dull ashy brown. I see from the Handbook by Salim Ali and Dillon Ripley that the race parrotti is differently coloured from the nominate sinensis and perhaps the dull coloured birds were of that race.

There were quite a few Redbreasted Flycatchers in the sanctuary and watching them was a somewhat sad experience, because for the last two years this delightful species has ceased coming to our garden in Andheri in winter. Previously a couple of birds used to inhabit our garden from September to April. Maybe the increasing urbanization has forced them to seek more congenial surroundings elsewhere.

## A MYNAS' GATHERING ON THE GROUND, IN THE MORNING

T. Gay

Noisy gatherings of mynas in trees or reed-beds at roosting time are a matter of daily observation. Have any of my fellow Members observed such a gathering on open ground, and that too in the morning hours?

On an early morning in January, my daily walk happened to take me along a narrow track that followed the contour of a bare, rock-strewn spur. It was about 7 a.m. Suddenly I became aware of the strident chatter of many mynas some way ahead of me. Since there were neither trees nor bushes on this slope, the birds could only be on the ground. A few moments later I saw them, a few paces away to the left of the track. There must have been about a hundred mynas, all hopping about and chattering excitedly, in an area about the size of a large room. Small parties were flying to join the gathering, while other small parties were flying off from it. Since I was suffering from an eye infection, I could not make out what was the focus of interest.

Just then a villager approached along the track, who assured me, in answer to my query, that he came this way every day at about that time. I pointed to the birds and asked him whether they gathered there daily. 'No', he replied, 'Have never seen a gathering like that before.'

I should mention that this spot was not very far from the Film Institute Estate, in whose high thick trees large flocks of mynas roost every evening.

## NOTES AND COMMENTS

Many readers must have enjoyed Peter Jackson's article 'Daysworth of Delhi Birds'. The Editor tried a similar game in Bombay on 23 January and listed 73 species. Incidentally Peter Jackson's article is being printed as a separate brochure by World Wildlife India and copies will be available next month. It would be extremely useful to have similar check-lists of what can be achieved in a day's birdwatching in different parts of India. Will Messrs Lavkumar, Neelakantan, Biswas and others make the attempt please, to record what they can observe in their respective areas.

## CORRESPONDENCE

A guesthouse for birdwatchers in Wales

In case any of your readers are interested, I can recommend a guesthouse for birdwatchers in the Welsh hills in Radnorshire. We spent a very good week there last May and saw a wealth of birds, river, woodland and hill species. This guesthouse is run by a bird photographer and his wife, and they can



take up to six people. We were comfortable and well fed. Their modernised cottage is in a delightful little valley, wooded and unspoiled, and there are at least fifteen pairs of buzzards' and pied flycatchers' nests in the garden! Before I forget, the name is McSweeney and the address: Tynewydd, Aberedw, Radnorshire, Wales.

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Birdwatching at Vihar Lake, Borivali National Park, Bombay

On the 14.xi.1971 on the NW. bank of Vihar Lake, I watched 9 Brahminy Ducks (Tadorna ferruginea)\*in the morning for more than an hour. They were resting in the sun on the sand-bed of a small island-like formation near the edge of the water. Two of them were preening their bodies but the rest were squatting on the ground, a few with their heads pushed in the wing-feathers.

In the month of December a pair of Marsh Harrier, male and female, was observed in the same area on several week-ends.

On 2.i.1972 about six Bluethroats were seen in the swampy thickets in the same area. One of them, observed for long and minutely had red spot inside the blue ring of the throat.

G. De  
Indian Inst. of Technology  
Bombay 76.

[\* I reported having seen a flock of 9 Tadorna ferruginea on 14.xi.1971 at Vihar Lake (Newsletter 11(12: 11). Presumably it is the same flock which was seen by Mr De. -- Ed.]

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ERRATA

1. Vol. 12(1): 2, 15th line from top for 'Blackbellied Finch-Larks', read 'Red Munias in winter plumage'.
2. The General Index sent out to members in December covers VOLUME 11 of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers and not Volume 12 as marked.

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# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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VOL XII NO. 3 MARCH 1972



NEWSLETTER FOR  
BIRDWATCHERS

Volume 12, Number 3

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COMMON BIRDS IN THE KASHMIR VALLEY

Jasper Newsome

This paper is a brief account of the birds that I saw in several recent summer seasons in the Kashmir Valley. Only once during this time I actually concentrate on watching birds, which was for a period of a couple of weeks in the spring of 1970 when I was fortunate enough to join Dr Salim Ali and a ringing party from the Bombay Natural History Society, who had come to catch duck as part of the Bird Migration Study Programme. Only then did I have the use of a pair of binoculars. This article only goes to show how much birdwatching one may do without the aid of optical instruments. Had I used binoculars I should not have seen many more species of birds than I was able to see without them. Most of the birds mentioned are to be seen in the environs of Srinagar, on the nearby lakes and in the neighbourhood of the Moghul Gardens. Sometimes I went further afield, such as to Manasbal Lake, or to Sind Nullah, and up into the hills around Sonmarg and Pahalgam. This article, however, only deals with the birds that I saw in the main valley itself.

I spent most of my time in and around a house and garden that I had rented on the slope above Nishat Bagh. The garden was very small but was enhanced by two great, old Chenar trees, two mulberry and two walnut trees. The most omnipresent birds of the garden were a pair of Common Mynas who were forever coming into the house in search of scraps, once even helping themselves to some medicine that I had left out on a table whilst I went to the kitchen for water with which to swallow



it. Both years that I spent in this house the mynas built their nest in the same corner of the eaves. I was told that in the winter these birds will roost in the rooms of houses, finding the cold night air too much to bear. Also resident in the garden were a pair of Whitecheeked Bulbuls, who would also enter the house quite nonchalantly in search of food. The garden was notable for the absence of crows and House Sparrows; sometimes two or three passing crows would drop in for a while, in the hope of being fed. Once a small party of Jungle Crows came down to a rug that was spread out in the garden and proceeded to attack a book that I had momentarily left there while I had gone to the house to fetch something. They tore out the pages of one chapter and scattered them about, the chapter was entitled 'Nature as Symbol: Emerson's Noble Doubt'. This I find extraordinary.

Another ubiquitous bird of the garden was the Common Cuckoo whose strident call sometimes became too much to bear. The bird occupying the garden in both 1970 and 1971 was of the brown variant, most probably the same bird. Common visitors to the garden were starlings, who nested in large numbers in Nishat Bagh. Also commonly frequenting the garden, although they nested in the neighbouring garden, were a beautiful pair of Golden Orioles, of whose calls one never could tire. One of a pair of Rufousbacked Shrikes that nested in the neighbourhood was often to be seen keeping a watchful guard on their territory from the crown of one of the mulberry trees. Hoopoes also commonly entered the garden. Another frequent visitor was a pair of Paradise Flycatchers, the male of which was fully mature, with magnificent long tail-streamers. Also commonly seen on most days, though not actually nesting in the garden, were Tickell's Thrushes, whose song is strongly reminiscent of the Blackbird, a common garden songster in England. In Nishat Bagh one could always see a few hopping about under the Chenars. A few times a Grey Drongo came to the garden. Occasionally a Brownfronted Pied Woodpecker came to the chenars.

In the latter part of the summer, when the plums in the surrounding orchards were ripe, marauding parties of Slatyheaded Parakeets would come down from the pine and deodar slopes, to the annoyance of the orchard owners, who would employ boys with tin cans filled with pebbles to keep them away from their trees. Once I saw a Verditer Flycatcher in the spring, but as far as I am aware, this species does not breed in the Kashmir Valley; I do not recall seeing one anywhere else in the area at any time. At night I several times heard a Wood- (or Tawny) Owl calling from the chenars in the garden and once went out and saw it. It was not a regular visitor to the garden.

Behind the house dry waterless slopes rose steeply up for a mile or so to the western rim of the Valley, beyond which lay the valley of Dachigam, a reserve for wild animals, birds

and plants, that is the last refuge for the great **Nashmir** Stag. These slopes were arid in the extreme, except just after rain (of which there was very little in the two summers that I stayed in the area). The last few hundred feet of the incline were vertical rock. Living up against the foot of the rock-face in rank grass and scrub was a small colony of Wrens, a bird which I am familiar with from England. Further down the slope, just above the house there was a colony of Bee-eaters, the European species, who built their nests at the end of tunnels excavated in the slope. Also to be seen here, and elsewhere in the valley, were Rollers, they too of the same species that is common in Europe but only known as a winter visitor to northern India.

Buntings were also to be seen on these dry slopes. The only species breeding there was the Whitecapped Bunting, a pair of which nested in a cavity at the base of the dry-stone wall that bordered the garden, opening out onto this dry, stony area. Several times in the early spring I saw a small party of Meadow Buntings, once or twice a Crested Bunting. On the slopes of the Shankaracharya Tekri (Takht-i-Suleiman) now also a nature reserve, the Greyheaded Bunting is to be seen; this species, which is very similar to the Whitecapped Bunting, although it has a much less bright light cap, probably breeds at several sites such as the Shankaracharya Tekri, but I never saw it for certain at Nishat, where the Whitecapped Bunting was common on drier ground. It would be interesting to find out the degree of overlap and the ecological preferences of these two very similar species. Both species may be seen on Shankaracharya Tekri, which is one of the main landmarks right on the outskirts of Srinagar, and which now has a motor road to its summit.

Other birds to be seen on the dry slopes, only, however, where there was a certain amount of cover, were the Pale Bush Warbler and the Lesser Whitethroat. Chukor ran about on these slopes too, and occasionally Kestrels hovered above them. Once I saw a Longlegged Buzzard hunting along them. Collared Doves and Rufous Turtle Doves would come there to feed. Skylarks were also often to be seen here.

Below the house there was a small canal, originally built in Moghul times to supply the water for the fountains in the Moghul Gardens of Shalimar and Nishat, fed by the river that runs out of the Dachigam valley. On this watercourse, which immediately below my garden has much of the character of a mountain stream, both Grey Wagtails and Spotted Forktails were to be seen. From the frequent, piercing alarm calls of the forktails, I assumed that these birds bred somewhere near; I think that this is the nearest that the characteristic bird of mountain streams comes to Srinagar.

Walking through Nishat Bagh, one could always see many Jackdaws, a small species of crow that is superficially like the

House Crow, although it is small and has less grey on the head and neck. This bird is known as 'Kavin' in Kashmiri, also as 'Kashmiri Kay' owing to the fact that it is a bird that is found here, but nowhere else in northern India, as a common breeder. Several times in the spring I saw leaf warblers in the Chenars, of what exact species I don't know, as lack of binoculars made positive identification impossible. No species appeared to remain in the area in the summer. Once I saw a White-eye in these gardens. I did not see this species anywhere else in Kashmir. Several times I saw Scaly-bellied Green Woodpeckers here, although I do not recall seeing this species during most of the summer months. Once whilst returning from the gardens to my house I saw a Wryneck, a nondescript speckled brown bird related to the woodpeckers that derives its name from its habit of engaging in tortuous contortions of the neck, something that it obligingly performed for me.

Often I used to travel to Srinagar from Nishat across the Dal Lake in a shikara. This provides one with the opportunity of seeing several species of birds that one would not meet with in dry localities. Most notable, both from its brilliant colours and its ubiquitous presence is the Kingfisher. This bird, which is a common motif in the hand-painted designs of Kashmiri papier-maché handicrafts (as is the Whitecheeked Bulbul, the 'national bird' of Kashmir, one manufacturer informed me), is to be seen almost anywhere where there is water deep enough for it to dive into. I often saw this beautiful little bird perched on the windowsills of house boats, more or less oblivious of the occupants. Another kingfisher to be seen quite commonly on the Dal Lake is the Lesser Pied Kingfisher. The Whitebreasted Kingfisher is also not uncommon, though it is less exclusively aquatic in its haunts than the other two species. The powerful song of the Indian Great Reed Warbler is to be heard in the denser patches of reeds in the quieter parts of the lake and the surrounding canals. Moorhens, Coots and Dabchicks could all be seen quite commonly on the Dal Lake, as could Whiskered Terns, though the latter are more numerous on the Manasbal Lake, some 15 miles from Srinagar. Also to be seen at Manasbal are Purple Gallinules and Pheasant-tailed Jacanas. Paddy birds are common throughout the damper parts of the valley, as are Grey Herons, Night Herons and Little Egrets. The latter two species nest in the Chenar trees of the Government Handicraft Emporium garden in Srinagar. Redwattled Lapwings are common around the valley. In the least savoury parts of the valley one may see both Whitebacked and Longbilled Vultures, the latter being much **less numerous than the former. On one visit to Manasbal I saw an immature Pallas's Fishing Eagle, a bird once common in the Valley but now apparently quite rare.**

Whilst the Bombay Natural History Society's party was working in Kashmir in 1970, we caught large numbers of Pied and



Yellow Wagtails, also several Yellowheaded Wagtails. Besides these we caught Hodgson's Pipits and once a pair of Pine Buntings. We also caught many Hoopoes, most of which were on passage through Kashmir.

Amongst the larger birds we caught many Mallard and Teal and several each of Gadwall and Garganey. Once we found a pair of Whiteheaded Duck, that had fallen to a punt-gunner, for sale alongside many coots at the junction of the Gulmarg road with the Srinagar-Baramullah main road. At the marsh of Mirgund, where we were netting duck, we saw many Snipe and a large party of Blackwinged Stilts. We also saw Common Sandpipers there.

On a brief visit to the sanctuary at Dachigam one day, we saw many brilliant scarlet and black (male) and orange and black (female) Shortbilled Minivets, a bird that seems not to be found in the main valley in summer. Also fairly numerous there, but not elsewhere that I went in Kashmir, were Grey Drongos. On a subsequent visit to Dachigam I saw a single Booted Eagle, a bird that I did not see elsewhere.

In the higher side valleys with their forests, and above them in the alpine-like meadows several other species are to be met with. I hope to make these the subjects of another article.

One thing that it is sad for me to record is that in the short space of time that I have known Kashmir, the forests have been vanishing at an alarming rate. May we hope that this trend is halted before it is too late.

## A FAREWELL TO KHANDALA

D. A. Stairmand

As the plane from Bangalore circled above Bombay Airport on 22.vi.1971 there were heavy monsoon clouds and rain. I hoped to travel to Khandala the following day but on that day it poured and poured -- 17 inches of rain in all, and the Newspapers said that this was a record amount of rain in Bombay for one day in June for 85 years -- and all means of transportation were suspended. However, next day - 24.vi - I managed to hire a car to plough through the roads and up the Western Ghats to my favourite hotel at Khandala.

Khandala looked marvellous. Trees were in thick foliage and the ground and hills were covered in verdent green. With all the rain - we had 8 inches in Khandala that day - waterfalls were cascading everywhere and were beautiful to see. I spent 5 days up there in the clouds and to me this was the highlight of my two months leave journeying around India, even despite a visit to Kashmir. Khandala was an old and loved friend to me.

I found many old friends in Khandala. A pair of Malabar Whistling Thrushes were again taking turns to sit on their nest on an unused window sill on a Power House. Their cobalt flashed



and the male - when not on nest duty - sang beautifully from high trees. There were several pairs of these birds in the hotel area and I watched a male singing and posturing from a branch evidently impressing the female a bit lower down as they soon both took to undulating flight - not their usual manner of flying - one closely behind the other until they reached and settled in the foliage of a tree about 30 yards away. Other old friends were a pair of dabchicks on the now very much swollen roadside tank. If they had lost their nest in the floods they would start all over again. The important thing - and it pleased me very much - was that they were still there. Around this tank were those two brilliant birds, the Common- and the Whitebreasted Kingfishers. These two, as well as Orange Minivets, and Yellow-backed Sunbirds, put thrilling colours into an overcast monsoon day.

Khandala is almost devoid of unpleasant noise and from about March until well into the SW. monsoon there is delightful song - Magpie Robins, Malabar Whistling Thrushes, Whitethroated Ground Thrushes, Blackbirds; and they were all in song at the end of June. I can think of no better rest cure than Khandala then - even the hotel had only one other occupant.

I was able to indulge in one of my favourite pastimes - studying young birds. Two pretty fledgeling Yellowthroated Sparrows were on the lush grass near the roadside tank and could hardly fly away as I walked towards them. Adult Redvented Bulbuls chattered excitedly as I went very close to a stub-tailed youngster and a party of delightful Rufousbellied Babblers had irresistible young birds with them. A party of 9 Brahminy Mynas - with fashionable hair-do's - were set against emerald green grass and one kept scurrying back to feed a young bird. A young Gold-fronted Chloropsis piped urgently in a tree and an adult fed it time and again. Just minutes after I had told my friend the hotel owner that Pied Bushchats departed from Khandala about the middle of June (after breeding there) I came across two stragglers - a female with her fledgeling. Perhaps something tragic has happened to the adult male - for I saw only her and the fledgeling for four consecutive days - and this had delayed breeding and departure to less rainy places.

I have sometimes felt compassion for Khandala birds when it rains and rains in sheets but am convinced that many birds - and I'll instance the thrushes and the Jungle- and Brahminy Mynas - prefer this to all other weather. Wood Shrikes become as tame as bulbuls around the hotel buildings.

Some Dusky Crag Martins were collecting mud for their nests and they were common and cheeky everywhere. Beautiful Wiretailed Swallows were also active and casting my eyes skywards I watched Crested Serpent Eagles and Whitebacked Vultures and a very handsome Indian Kestrel - the last named hovering over a cliff ledge just beyond the edge of Powwalla Hill. From where I was it looked as though it was only a foot or so above the grass.

I had good luck with a covey of fussy little Bush Quail. I was wandering along dreaming a bit but woke up sufficiently to notice them trot into bushes to escape my attention. I tried a ruse by walking past them with an air of distraction. Then I cunningly and furtively - but innocently - retraced my footsteps and spied on them from behind a boulder and they were delightful to watch feeding and waddling around.

I was also lucky with a pair of Pied Crested Cuckoos - such handsome birds. I had been watching Junglefowl and thrushes from high up on a bank and there was a lot of thick cloud down to ground level. Presently a Pied Crested Cuckoo flew into the tree above me and waited. We could both hear another bird flying downstream towards us and calling. As the second bird approached the first one took to flight and both disappeared into the cloudy haze, leaving me with the joy of the first Pied Crested Cuckoos I had spotted that season. A bit late? Oh, no! You should just see my records for 1969 and 1970!

There were lovely Green Pigeons, Blossomheaded Parakeets, the young Bearer at the hotel (which is, alas, soon to be sold and 'improved') pointed out to me Lorikeets which I had missed virtually on my own doorstep, and then there were the usual pair of Blacknaped Blue Flycatchers in addition to Ioras, Ashy Wren Warblers (and these I had not seen last monsoon), Small Green Barbets, Spotted Babblers, Jungle Babblers, Redwattled Lapwings, and, I believe, Chestnutheaded Bee-eaters.

As I did my final rounds on this visit I had a lump in my throat. My last visit was to the pair of Malabar Whistling Thrushes nesting on the Power House window-sill. I had watched them the previous monsoon hatch and feed their young. This year I could not stay. As I approached the area the male flew upwards to a tree with a warning cry to his mate. It sounds like the screeching of vehicle breaks. I stayed and the female sat tight on the nest and presently the male poured forth his song. Eventually I had to go and just before departing I said 'Good-bye fellow; Good-bye lady. Good luck'. I was tearing myself away from old and loved friends. And trust was on both sides.

I have headed these notes 'A farewell to Khandala'. I trust it will be just that for I hope to be able to return there for a holiday next winter. Maybe there will not be any song, but there will be cheery calls and plenty of Wagtails, Rosefinches, Flycatchers and many others and, if I'm lucky, Trogons and Blue-headed Rock Thrushes; and perhaps a few more of the not so common birds. But what 'makes' Khandala for me is, in fact, the 'common' birds - I know and love it and them so well. During a stay in Poona a tourist approached me and tried to describe a bird he had just seen. I guessed a Parakeet, but this answer did not satisfy him. So I asked for more details and decided he must have seen a Common Green Bee-eater. He said 'Well, Sir, it's not common to me, it was glorious'. I echo those sentiments.

## TWO CASTAWAYS WITH BIRDS

Everyone will want to play Mr Stairmand's game.

My island doesn't include any desert but is like those pictured at the beginning of atlases, where gulfs and isthmuses lead across peneplains and plateaux to the snows, and rivers plunge down precipices and meander through wheat and rice fields. A volcano is smoking in the background too.

All over the island kites glide effortlessly, chasing one another and diving for dropped twigs. Kestrels poise, motionless except for an occasional shiver of the wings. Swallows swoop and twist over the lake and a tern beats up and down the shore on slender, backswept wings. I climb the hills to see the white-capped redstarts and the forktails flitting in the streambed, and, higher up, stand to watch the crag martins zooming over the edge of the cliff, twisting and turning at the same phenomenal speed in all directions, up or down, as though for them gravity did not exist.

Back at my shack I see the hoopoes probing the lawn while a pair of purple sunbirds follow each other from shrub to shrub. Each morning a magpie-robin sings, 'so sweet the sense faints' hearing it.

As a bonus, the crab plover visits me annually. I have always wanted to see him.

7.ii.1972

R. E. Hawkins

\* \* \*

Considering that for my selection of birds the habitats are appropriate, I would select the following: My main aim in some of them would be to resurrect those Indian birds on the Vanishing List for which there may be some chances of their surviving somewhere in remote areas and where resurveys have not been done thoroughly. Thus my selection would be:

The Pinkheaded Duck: I have always been keen on waterfowl and this duck though I had seen it in the collection of Mr Alfred Ezra, at Foxwarren Park, Surrey, I would love to keep it and breed it in captivity while studying it.

Jerdon's Courser: Have always been keen on waders and the like and I would get a chance of seeing this now considered extinct bird.

The Mountain Quail: An interesting game bird of immense rarity could be bred in my Aviaries on the Island while some would be free to breed at liberty.

The Great Indian Bustard: A bird that is fast vanishing and a magnificent bird to observe as it walks and has a most impressive courtship display.

The Redfaced Malkoha: A rare bird of dense forest and amidst interesting forest cover I could watch its habits and nesting behaviour.



The Grandala: With its bright blue colour flying over the cliffs and also study its nesting habits, amidst salubrious alpine climate.

The Emerald Cuckoo: With its gorgeous metallic colours secretly endeavouring to parasite some bird in virgin forest.

The Violet Cuckoo: With its impressive and bright colours moving amidst the most beautiful orchids in the evergreen forests also searching for nests to parasitize.

The Redbreasted Falconet: To watch its nesting habits and its flight after its prey; something quite dainty and new to me amongst the birds of prey.

The Himalayan Golden Eagle: Perhaps the most impressive large bird of prey and the largest of its race in the world. Its aerial manouvres and thunderbolt strikes at its prey a variety of gorgeous pheasants and other mountain game birds etc. And to watch it at its eyerie.

The Caspian Tern: To enjoy the seaside habitat and to see this not uncommon bird hunting and nesting in its typical maritime habitat with all the other birds which are on the sea side.

All my birds are found on the Indian subcontinent and I think I would have a variety of habitats in which to see many other birds if that is allowed in the rules of the game. For the birds must feed and eat on something.

15.ii.1972

R. S. Dharmakumarsinhji

#### THE COURAGE OF THE FANTAIL FLYCATCHER

D. A. Stairmand

At the beginning of June 1971, I was walking along a very quiet road between Cotacamund Golf Course and Wenlock Downs. There were old trees near the road as well as a stream and bushes and I was enjoying it all and catching glimpses of many birds. Soon the serenity was shattered as I heard and saw a Fantail Flycatcher attacking a glossy, fearsome-looking Jungle Crow. To my dismay I saw that the crow was dismembering a nestling Fantail Flycatcher on an horizontal bough. The nestling was being torn apart while still alive and the scene was gruesome. The anguish of the flycatcher was great and its courage was great, too. It continually attacked the crow but its daintiness of build and smallness compared with the tough crow rendered all attacks futile. This fact did not, however, deter the flycatcher and it flew at the crow from all directions and several times it seemed to me that a swing of the crow's bill would injure the adult flycatcher. Shortly, both adult flycatchers joined battle with the crow. But the crow held the nestling underfoot and swung its bill violently at the adult flycatchers. Finally the nestling died and one flycatcher flew back to its nest, where, presumably



it still had young to tend.

The remaining adult flycatcher carried on harrassing the crow as much as possible but the crow finished its delectable dinner and wiped its bill on the bough. After a few minutes allowed for digestion the crow flew towards the tree containing the flycatchers' nest and was harried all the way and driven a bit off course by an adult flycatcher. When the crow, and its tiny attacker, were nearing the tree with the nest the other flycatcher flew off the nest and away from the tree on the 'blind' side of the crow and I'm very glad to say that the crow was thwarted, for the time being at least, of any further plundering. Fantail Flycatchers can never keep still and if the bird had remained on its nest when the crow was nearby the crow would have had no difficulty finding the nest again and its treasures. So the flycatcher did very well to leave so brilliantly on the crow's 'blind' side. The continued harrasment of the flycatchers now took some effect on the crow, as without its prize in sight, it retreated towards a tree nearer to me. I hurled stones at it and managed to drive it away, cawing angrily. It was only then that I noticed that crow had a mate, which had presumably been perched all the while in a vantage point watching activities and waiting for the flycatchers to betray their concealed nest. Anyway, both Jungle Crows flew off and at least something had been salvaged from the day for the charming flycatchers. A dark cloud on the horizon was that the intelligent crows would almost certainly return to the scene of their crime.

I must confess admiration for the flycatchers in every way. They are not only gay, lively and beautiful but extremely brave. But what of the crows? It is not only that they kill birds - it is the cruel and savage way they do it. A Peregrine Falcon is a clean and beautiful and almost painless killer while the crow is a torturer. The crow may be a beneficial bird at times but it is always disgruntled and given to harrasment and even unnecessary cruelty.

So why does the crow exist as it exists? Maybe we all need a hated 'father figure'.

#### NOTES AND COMMENTS

This issue has been delayed for two reasons. First of all February is a short month inspite of its being a leap year; secondly the Editor had been on tour during most of the month in the forested areas of Maharashtra State from Chandgarh adjoining Belgaum to north Melghat adjoining Madhya Pradesh. He will make amends in the near future by commenting on the wonderful birdlife that was seen during this trip.

Readers are reminded about the Crow Inquiry instituted by the Bombay Natural History Society. At the initial meeting very few members of our Club were present. Will those interested and in a position to help please contact the Curator, Bombay Natural History Society, for the data forms to be filled in.

#### CORRESPONDENCE

##### Birdwatching from a veranda

Barh is a small subdivisional town and it is surely not as developed as a subdivisional town should be. There are houses along the road but cultivation is still done in the tracts around the houses, wheat and maize being the main crop with some cultivation of dillies and tobacco. On the trees in front of my house I observe birdlife sitting on my veranda. Common mynas are plentiful and make a great noise every morning. They seem to be engaged in very hot discussions. Some time a flock of Greyheaded Mynas comes to the silk cotton and other trees and search the bark and crevices of the bare trees for insects. To the date palms tapped for their juice come common crows, tree pie and redvented bulbuls to drink the fermented juice. Tree pies are most frequent visitors for this drink. In a nearby bush lives a pair of Whitebreasted waterhen; they roost on a date palm at night.

In winter months, Redbreasted Flycatchers, and small grey warblers, of whose identity I am not sure about, visit the flower beds. Occasionally Bluethroats are also seen picking insects under flower beds. The bright and cheerful song of Purple Sunbirds is heard from December onwards.

Among the birds of prey, the Shikra is present throughout the year. His presence scares away other birds. Kestrels and Buzards are also seen around the house in winter months. The Goldenbacked Woodpeckers frequent the tad palms and attract attention by their loud cries.

A pair of hoopoes were nesting this January in a hole under a thatched roof; the nest contained chicks in the middle of January. This seems to be a bit earlier than what is mentioned in the standard bird books.

Kameshwar Pd Singh  
A.N.S. College, Barh

##### Winter birds at Juhu, Bombay

The cold season at Juhu has started with the usual winter visitors: the hoopoe, wagtails, white and grey, the golden orioles, Blyth's reed warbler, etc.

The Bee-eaters are always the earliest to appear, and each morning they deck the casuarinas, like the glistening baubles on a Christmas tree, and sometimes through sheer exuberance, just glide out and float entranced in the sunlight, like wisps

of green and golden filigree. The golden orioles are most exciting, for the male is always pursuing the female, and I love to watch him with his pointed bill and swept-back wings, hurtling through the morning like a sun-struck projectile.

Blyth's reed warbler is here every year at this time, giving all the hedges a thorough workover, and almost everyday I see a warbler-like bird in the casuarina tree, that I am quite certain is a Whitethroat.

Wagtails, grey and white, and brown and yellow ones, are constantly promenading on the lawn, and when the grass is newly cut, a flock of swallows weave in an intricate flight pattern over the lawn.

Every day, a cluster of ansy swallow-shrikes might be seen, sitting in neat and well-behaved rows on the casuarina's topmost branches, and once I saw a kestrel, hovering in mid-air like a helicopter, and also perching on the casuarina.

A pair of spotted munias keeps transporting grasses to the coconut tree, but never actually constructs anything; and I was amazed, on one occasion, to see a whitebreasted waterhen come scurrying out of the hedge in a great panic, flutter across the lawn and disappear into the shrubbery.

Whitebreasted Kingfisher, which formerly used to come on every Sunday and public holiday, now comes only on the second Sunday of every month. It always takes up a strategic position on the foremost coconut tree which overlooks the beach, and from where it keeps a keen look-out for crabs; no sooner does it spot its prey, then in one clean swoop of sudden iridescence, it has seized the luckless creature and carried it back to its perch, where it proceeds to dismember the decapod with great deliberation and delicacy, nipping off each leg, and then devouring the body.

All over the beach, tiny little plovers in flocks or in singlets hurry and scurry like little brown mice.

In November, on two occasions I observed large flocks of ducks, about 200 to 300 birds floating on the sea, just beyond identification range; and once, at twilight, I saw ducks in desultory flocks, come flighting from the dimmed west, from somewhere near the lighthouse, and dip beyond the coconut canopy into the marshes on the eastern side of Juhu.

Once again in January, when the sea was as calm and flat as a sheet of pilkington float glass, I saw ducks in undetermined multitudes, scattered on the rimless sea. These were always observed during the afternoos. Over the beach, right near the Juhu-Versova creek, I once saw a Nightjar, weaving through the cobalt haze of utmost evening.

Once too, I spotted a spotted owl, perched on a lamppost near the beach. As soon as it saw me stop and regard it closely, it fled, out of the lamp's demulcent halo, and into the gloom - I watched it go, a dark and silent shape, winging soundlessly beneath the weary and anaemic moon.



An in this season when the sea shimmers with a pellucid warmth it attracts large numbers of sea gulls, which to me always suggest glorified white doves; and they are a truly lovely sight, as they float upon the water in the translucent haze of morning, for they appear to waft like fragile dreams upon the dim vapours of oblivion.

Upon the sand bars in the Versova creek, large flocks of assorted gulls and terns congregate each day; and they are always presided over by a single huge blackheaded gull, so that they give the appearance of a voters' meeting being addressed by an election candidate.

On the flats between Juhu and Vile-Parle, and bordering on the Juhu airport, there is an extensive area of brackish water, formed by tidal seepage and bounded on one side by lush fields of grass. This spot attracts immense swarms of egrets, gulls and other waders. Last year I saw little egrets and reef herons here.

This year there were flocks of blackwinged stilts, sandpipers, some stilt-like waders with long red bills tipped with black, pipits, chestnut backed manakins in the grass fields, etc.

Unfortunately, I was hardly there for 20 minutes (it being during the war), when a mob of irate persons swooped down on me. Most of them were satisfied that I was watching birds with binoculars, and did not have a camera; but one or two persons insisted that I have been photographing the military installations with a camera hidden in my binoculars, and had the police come and take me away in a jeep to the police station where I explained that I was a bird artist and a birdwatcher, and I took the police inspector to my home and showed him my bird paintings and also copies of the Newsletter.

I recount the above incident as I feel that it might be of interest to birdwatchers, particularly in a country where the majority of people are unaware that such an activity as Birdwatching exists.

Winston Creado  
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# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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VOL XII NO. 4 APRIL 1972



NEWSLETTER FOR  
BIRDPATCHERS

April 1972

Volume 12, Number 4

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BIRDPATCHING IN RAJKOT

John Keay & Julian Keay

In the space of a few hours spent walking within 3 miles of the centre of Rajkot we saw 65 different species of bird. In Europe one would be lucky under similar circumstances to see half that number. The variety of Indian birds speaks for itself but what strikes the foreign visitor even more is their accessibility, even their tameness. A pair of wiretailed swallows left their search for insects over a small pool and settled on a rock just six feet from where we stood. If the pheasant-tailed jacana had been in full plumage we would have been almost stepping on its tail before it deigned to take wing and display his flight pattern. Even the pelicans apparently riding at anchor like a fleet of sailing boats just off the edge of a large reservoir allowed us to approach far closer than would any but the commonest of the wary waterbirds of Europe.

I must admit that on our own we would never have positively identified all 65 species. But in the person of Mr Lavkumar we were fortunate in having a guide with an exceptional knowledge of the birds, and what is perhaps the most international

trait of the birdwatcher, a real affection for them. Left to our own devices the subtler characteristics of the short-toed lark and greyheaded finch-lark or the pied- and the rufoustailed chat would have been lost in our excitement to see a purple moorhen. But with Mr Lavkumar no bird, however sober or common, was ignored. We were able to identify four different dove and pigeon species, six different ducks including the minute cotton teal and the beautiful brahmyni, and three different babblers - for a European perhaps the most confusing genus of all. We learnt something of the mythical significance of the Indian robin and the Sarus crane and the peacock and were able to distinguish the Indo-European and Siberian variations of the swallows and sand martins.

There were moments when our companion must have been a little amazed by our enthusiasm. The hoopoe is a common enough bird in India but its appearance in Western Europe is a great event for birdwatchers. However many one sees in a tour of the subcontinent it is difficult to accept it as readily as the crow or sparrow. The same applies to the parish kite whilst the marsh harrier which we almost confused with it is now restricted in England to just a very few carefully protected reserves. Also classed as rare visitors or dwindling species in Western Europe are the purple heron, the ring plover and the Caspian tern -- three birds which at Rajkot we saw in five minutes on the same small stretch of water. Several other species presumably common here are not even mentioned in my guide to British birds. The red and the yellow wattles put to shame the small European lapwing and the common kingfisher is outshone by the beautiful whitefronted and pied varieties of India. We have no bulbuls or bee-eaters, not even a myna or a bower weaver yet all these birds were positively common in at least one variety around Rajkot.

Every visitor to Saurashtra hopes to see flamingos and perhaps the Great Indian Bustard. We are still in search of them but if we leave without seeing them I shall not be disappointed. That stretch of water at the end of the big reservoir was more than compensation. On the banks were sandgrouse, spot-bills, ibis and sandpipers, in the shallows grey- and purple herons, spoonbills and painted storks and beyond them on the edge of the open water that flock of billowing pelicans. A stray breeze was blowing across the water as we left and I wondered whether those half folded wings were ever utilized as sails.



## IN THE NILGIRIS IN EARLY JUNE

D. A. Stairmand

Gone were the clear blue skies of January and although there was not much rain in Ooty during my stay from 1.vi to 8.vi.71 the poor light needed adjusting to. There were days of high wind and when this was accompanied by rain it was all pretty chilling except when taking brisk walks or sitting at night around a log of fire. Mostly room temperature stayed around 10°C both day and night. However there was little or no rain at Coonoor or around Kotagiri and at these lower altitudes it was brighter and warmer and when I returned to Ooty from these places I loved Ooty's invigorating climate. Diesel fumes were much less noticeable around Ooty than on the bright, dry days of January but this advantage was offset by the almost constant drone of pesticides being sprayed mechanically on potato fields where once, not so long ago, there were wonderful sholas.

Just outside Ooty on my journey from Mysore I watched a Black-winged Kite over potato fields and later during my stay I saw at least two Blackwinged Kites near the Kotagiri road only a few miles outside Ooty. Handbook Vol. 1 indicates that this bird is found up to c. 1200 m in the peninsular hills whereas my sightings were at c. 2200 m. It would appear that this attractive hawk is extending its range higher.

I had found hoopoes uncommon in Ooty in January but now they were quite plentiful.

There were hundreds of Small Sunbirds (Nectarinia minima) in the area and they were particularly abundant in Sims Park, Coonoor which itself was in fine fettle. This bird breeds in Khandala chiefly March/April and seems to breed in the Nilgiris about September/October according to Dr Salim Ali's Indian Hill Birds, and the birds I saw most certainly were in non-breeding dress but delightful for all that. One brightish day in Sims Park I watched a party of Small Sunbirds, White-eyes and Velvetfronted Nuthatches passing through an area working the trees for insects and there were so many birds involved that the procession took twenty minutes to pass by. Nuthatches were common and White-eyes easily the most abundant of all birds in the area and they, at least, seem to greatly benefit from the eucalyptus plantations.

Quite a number of birds in the Nilgiris were feeding nestlings or fledgelings and it is always a great pleasure to watch these activities and study immature plumage. Some of the species I watched going about these activities between 6000-7500 ft were Nilgiri Pipit, Pied Buschat, Whitespotted Fantail Flycatcher, Grey Tit, Southern Blackbird, Rufousbacked Shrike, Small Green Barbet, Redwhiskered and Redvented Bulbul, Velvetfronted Nuthatch, Magpie Robin.

I came across a few parties of Red Munias and this was the first time that I had seen them in their truly wild state. They were just as innocent and charming as caged ones but probably much happier in their heart of hearts. They may live only for a day in the wild but they live that day happy and free.

Another bird I did not see in January but which was now quite common was the attractive Pied Flycatcher Shrike Hemipus picatus. I liked its longish tail, cheeky perching and agile pursuit of insects. A very welcome member to the Nilgiri bird squad.

The birds that were singing most of all seemed to me to be the Nilgiri Verditer Flycatchers and their enthusiasm to expose themselves to their mates from vantage points on trees lead them to expose themselves to me at the same time. In this species both the male and female sing. Dr Salim Ali's Indian Hill Birds suggests that only the male sings but whistler supports me and I am sure that 'Women's Lib.' would avidly support this equality of the sexes. In any case it is a very pretty song and species, perfectly suited to its environment.

One morning while meditating happily and unseen in a hill forest just outside Ooty a very handsome Crested Hawk-Eagle (Spizaetus cirrhatus) landed on a bough just above eye-level and only some 20 yards from me. I was allowed to have my binoculars trained on this bird for perhaps three minutes while it pivoted around giving me front and side views, before I was spotted. Then the bird gave a loud high-pitched call of several notes and flew away leaving me very excited and even happier. Such a wonderful view of this bird had really made my day. I should mention here that pairs of Crested Serpent Eagle (Spilornis cheela) were frequently seen and heard over forested areas.

Perhaps my most vivid memory of the lovel male Black-and-Orange Flycatcher is of a sunny afternoon when I sat down in hill forest on a boulder. Within a minute or two a beautifully coloured 'autumnal leaf' floated down onto a nearby stone. I looked again - yes, you've guessed right, it was a male Black-and-Orange Flycatcher.

I will outline here one typically good spell one morning in hill forest off the Kotagiri Road just a few miles outside Ooty. At first the weather was dull and chill and then there was a heavy downpour of rain which I weathered out - rather wetly - under a trunk of a tree and finally it was cloudy bright, very slippery underfoot but a little warmer. In these conditions I was in my element and so were the birds. Black Bulbuls were in the high foliage keeping the forest alive and lively with their pleasant calls. Parties of Rufous-breasted Laughing Thrushes and Scimitar Babblers passed through the area feeding hungrily and calling pleasantly. I had a ring-side seat while one Scimitar Babbler stripped a butterfly of

its wings before eating it. Blackbirds sang a lot and Nilgiri Verditer Flycatchers sang all the while. One male Verditer Flycatcher put a red berry in its bill and held it there for several minutes - whether this was breeding display or not it was most attractive. Also on hand were Redwhiskered Bulbuls, Velvet-fronted Nuthatches, Grey Tits, White-eyes, Pied Flycatcher Shrikes, a Mountain Thrush, Greyheaded Flycatchers, an Iora and a pair of Black-and-Orange Flycatchers as well as Nilgiri Langurs. I watched the pair of Black-and-Orange Flycatchers at close quarters for 1½ hours from a boulder near a stream in this dank, lovely piece of hill forest. I noticed that both birds called - the males' voice weak and the females' even more faint but both were definitely calling all the while as they sallied from boulder to tree to bush. Just after the rain stopped there was a rush of water coming towards me from the foliage canopy. I took this to be Nilgiri Langurs racing across the tree-tops but after the cascade had drenched me in its path I saw it had been caused by two really beautiful Giant Squirrels. They had now stopped and were chattering to each other and clambering around the trees giving me excellent views. On my way down the hill I slipped and gashed a leg but soon had iodine on it and after 3 hours with my feet up at the Hotel I was out again in driving, cold rain walking Venlock Downs where I watched a pair of Fantail Flycatchers put up a tremendously brave but unsuccessful attempt to save a nestling from a Jungle Crow. In all, a wonderful and varied day fairly typical of my week's stay -- except that I did not always fall quite so carelessly.

Other birds in the Ooty-Coonoor-Kotagiri area included the Ashy Wren Warbler, Nilgiri House Swallow, Jungle Myna, Nilgiri Flowerpecker, Purple Sunbird, Nilgiri Wood Pigeon, Painted Bush Quail, Grey Jungle fowl, Yellowcheeked Tit, Spotted Munia (one pair were nesting in a 'monkey-puzzle' tree in Sims Park), Skylark, Larger Goldenbacked Woodpecker.

Foxes were not uncommon and often abroad even at midday. I was delighted to see these lovely animals.

Once or twice I went to warmer climes near Glenburn Estate some way below Kotagiri and there some other birds became apparent and, for example, the delightful Yellowcheeked Tits became much more common. Other attractive birds there I would like to name are: Lorikeet, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Orange Minivet, Goldenbacked Threetoed Woodpecker, Yellowbrowed Bulbul. Spotted Babbler were around Glenburn and called pretty-sweet as they appear to me do all over Madras and Mysore States whereas our Maharashtrian ones call He'll-beat-you. They invariably do beat me and it is pretty sweet success when I see one. But do birds really have different dialects or accents or is it all in the imagination of the listener?

The Botanical Gardens, Ootacamund were very beautiful.

I hope you will have gathered that I had a really wonderful week.



## AN EARLY MORNING IN BORIVLI NATIONAL PARK, Bombay

R. H. Waller

Early morning in mid February can still be quite cold in Bombay if you are driving out in the dark to Borivli Park to get there at first light. However, the cold is forgotten when one arrives to the first calls of the Peafowl as they come down from their night roosts and the lovely liquid notes of the bulbuls - Redvented and Redwhiskered - as they start searching the brilliant red flowers on the silk cotton trees. Then comes the flash of gold and black as the Blackheaded Oriole flies from branch to branch. Such sights and sounds are of particular thrill to one who has just arrived from Europe in the grip of winter, where hardly any birds sing and there are no bright colours to relieve the sombre grey of the season. There is nothing like the elated screams of the Roseringed Parakeet as they swerve and turn in fighter aircraft fashion low over the trees, or the jubilant crow of the Grey Jungle Cock as he welcomes the first rays of the sun. Now the whole forest comes to life with the ringing calls of the Grey Partridge; the metallic and varied notes of the Tree-Pie as he flops from tree to tree; the sweet, high-pitched song of the Magpie Robin; the monotonous tonk, tonk of the Crimsonbreasted Barbet with the Large Green Barbet joining at times, and the explosive scolding of the Babbblers in their small parties. One sound that is not unfamiliar to European ears, and is not particularly welcome as there are too many of them, is the hoarse cawing of the crows - Jungle and House. The latter is particularly annoying as, having little or no fear of man, it approaches very near and noisily just as one is trying to record some other bird call or song on the tape recorder. For instance it largely drowned the low booming sound of the Emerald Dove; the low volume but high pitch of the sunbird's song (in this case the Purple and the Purplerumped) and the amazing mimicry of those delicately coloured birds, the Goldfronted Chloropsis.

Other birds are pleasantly familiar to European eyes and ears, some of them winter migrants to India and not yet ready to start on their long journey to their northern nesting areas: the Common Swallow (Hirundo rustica), some of whom had not yet acquired the long outer tail feathers of the breeding plumage; the Redrumped Swallow (H. daurica), not all of which are migratory outside India; the Yellow Wagtail, and the various species of wintering duck, such as Pintail, Wigeon and Common- and Gargany Teal. These latter were seen when we got further into the Borivli Park on the edge of the lake.

On the lake side we also saw Pied- and White Wagtails, Indian Common Pipits, Common Sandpipers, Little Ring Plover, Redwattled Lapwings, Brown- and Blackheaded Gulls, Whitebreasted Kingfishers,



Little Cormorants, Cattle- and Little Egrets and Pond Herons. A Grey Quail in the same locality, that is on the grassland between the forest and the lake, was quite an exciting find; as also a lone Bluethroat - the gorget showing clearly but without the blue inside it, which is acquired usually in the full breeding plumage. Here overhead many Palm Swifts were flying in their endless search for insects on the wing.

Back in the forest again we had an excellent view of a White-eyed Buzzard, which was remarkably tame and sat quietly near the top of a small tree for us to examine his immature plumage; the markings on the nape and back of neck were finally diagnostic.

Others fully mature were seen a bit later. Of the other raptors, the delicately shaped and coloured Blackwinged Kite was seen, and, inevitably, the Pariah Kites and Whitebacked Vultures; also a Barred Owllet was heard and seen briefly.

A bevy of Blossomheaded Parakeets was an interesting and lovely sight; a Rufous Turtle Dove (Streptopelia orientalis), clearly seen on the ground, could have been either the migratory race or the more resident peninsular race, but field identification is difficult; two species of woodpecker: the more readily noticed and strikingly coloured Goldenbacked Woodpecker, and the easily overlooked Rufous Woodpecker, whose colour blends with the tree-trunks; a glimpse of long, black tail streamers trailing behind a glistening black bird identified, the Greater Racket-tailed Drongo; and finally the always exciting sight of the male Paradise Flycatchers, both fully white, with their tail streamers like fish in a pool -- all these were some of the sights that rounded off a most delightful bird walk and drive in the Borivli National Park.

Other birds seen that morning were: Black, and Grey Drongos, House Sparrow, Yellowthroated Sparrow, Green Bee-eater, Common Myna, Small Minivet, Spotted Dove, Redbreasted Flycatcher, Tickell's Flycatcher, Phylloscopus species, Prinia species, Large Cuckoo-Shrike, Rufousbacked Shrike and Crow-Pheasant.

The total was 65 species seen in the comparatively short time between 0700 and 0930 on 16.ii.1972. This gives some idea of the rich birdlife to be seen and enjoyed in the Borivli National Park and, at least from a European's point of view, how fortunate are those in Bombay, interested in the beauties of nature, to have such an area on their very door step.

#### A CASTAWAY WITH BIRDS

K. K. Neelakantan

Please make my island an exact replica of the Periyar Sanctuary. Since the rules of the game will call for the removal of all but ten kinds of the sanctuary's birds, please remove also every form of animal that may interfere with or terminate pre-

maturely my own existence on the island. If you have to call in St Patrick to banish the snakes, kindly persuade him to rid the island of leaches too.

Birds aren't gramophone records and, therefore, I feel that to impose any kind of restriction on the numbers of individuals of each of the ten species is unfair. I take it that to make up for the lack of variety, there will be a generous quota of individuals allowed of each kind. My list will include the Brown-throated Spinetail Swift, the Yellowbrowed Bulbul and the Scimitar Babbler. Can you imagine just a pair of any of these occupying a habitat?

1. I must have a bulbul on my island. The Redwhiskered would be an excellent companion, but I would rather have a more gregarious species. If you allow only ten species, I had better choose a few that are uninhibited, active and noisy - let it be the Yellowbrowed Bulbul then.

2. The Southern Tree Pie is so conspicuous a bird of the Ghats forests, and one of the most graceful that I must have it. Also, by robbing an occasional nest it will act as a check on the numbers of the bulbul and others.

3. The Southern Grackle cannot be divorced from the tree pie. With its ear-splitting cacophony it will make up for the absence of many other vociferous species.

4. With an allowance of only 10 kinds of birds I can't afford to include any migrants. If I can persuade the Paradise Flycatcher to remain and breed, I should like to have it. If not, give me that dainty little dancer, the Whitebrowed Fantail Flycatcher. I may have to exert myself somewhat to protect its nest from the tree pie; but as I won't have anything to do except watch birds, I shall manage to save enough nests and young to keep the tribe alive.

5. I must have some birds which prefer to skulk so that I may play hide and seek with them. Perhaps the Scimitar Babbler will be the best choice. Its what-ho-ho and Yes dear will enliven the undergrowth.

6. Why not have a bird whose curious breeding habits would repay scrutiny? The Rufous Woodpecker will be all right for this.

7. Another bird with an eccentric disposition is the Brown-throated Spinetail Swift, said to nest on the floor of deep hollows in gigantic trees. I could study its habits and use the techniques Heinz (Woodpecker) Sielmann and Ron & Rosemary (Kingfisher) Eastman to get the first-ever photographs and cine films of its eggs and young. Also, this large gregarious swift will put some life into the sky and rid me of some of the noisome insects bound to be on the island.

8. Let me have the fast disappearing Great Hornbill too. When the mainland birds have all gone, I may be able to supply a few pairs to dedicated conservationists.

9. Another vanishing giant I should like to have is the Great Black Woodpecker. On my island I will be seeing it for the first time. As the only other woodpecker will be the Rufous, there won't be any serious competition for food.

10. My tenth will be the Large Racket-tailed Drongo. It is not only that this bird by itself can fill the forest with life and movement, but I consider it a species worth concentrated study. From '68 to '70 I had it for a neighbour and took more than a neighbourly interest in its domestic life. Though I learnt very little, there was never a dull moment when it was about. To emphasize this by contrast, there was often a flock of Orangebreasted Green Pigeons at the same place. When not feeding, they were so lethargic that watching them could be recommended as a cure for insomnia.

My bonus? All right, throw in a pair of Black Eagles if you don't mind. No! Please wait; I find that I haven't a single bird to foot the forest floor! In these ultra-democratic days one can dispense with kings; give me a flock of Jungle Babblers instead. That will serve to remind me of the city crowds and help me relish my solitude on the desert island.

#### SCARCITY OF CERTAIN BIRDS IN NEPAL

Reproduced from Nepal Nature Conservation Society's Newsletter, No. 8, p. 2; February 1972/

A year ago the Blackthroated Thrush (Turdus ruficollis), which is usually numerous in Kathmandu Valley, was almost absent. Again this year this species is scarce. Also the Demoiselle Crane (Anthropoides virgo) which arrives by the thousands in the tarai along the big rivers in October, were counted by hundred only in 1971. Both the thrush and the crane are eaten as a delicacy and one wonders why so few arrived from northern regions. Is this scarcity limited to our area or has it been noted in India?

#### BIRD COUNT IN KATHMANDU VALLEY, Nepal

R. L. Fleming

Kathmandu Valley count coming up. Our 'Christmas Count' occurred on 8th of January because son Bob and I had only just returned from a 37 day trek in the northeastern Nepal where we checked on birds for our book on the birds of Nepal. The day was dull with heavy fog which lasted until ten o'clock. There were two cars, Bob and five British folks in one car and two of us Americans and four Swiss in our car. Only five of us were veterans.

The first car left at 6 a.m. and headed southeast to Phulchowki mountain (9000 ft). They canvassed likely spots in the Valley then drove to the top. Government is constructing a



a telecommunications station up there and dynamiting had greatly disturbed the birdlife. Reward awaited them at the summit when a flock of 15 Burton's Finches appeared - the first time we had seen them in the Valley. In all they turned up a total of 119 different species.

The second car drove through the fog to the King's Forest on Nagarjung to about 5500 ft above the fog canopy. A Lammergeier launched into the air on a nine foot wing span from cliffs above us. An hour later one of the Swiss ladies exclaimed: 'I heard a flutter of wings right here by my feet.' We threw a stone into scrub vegetation of that steep hillside and out flew both a Spiny Babbler and a Black Partridge, new to our Christmas list. Returning we were treated to the antics of the moth-like Wall Creeper, here from Siberia for the winter. Along the Manora river we luckily found a pair of Finsch's Starlings, bringing our total to 83 species.

Both cars returned to our home in the gathering dusk. Along with high tea, we put our lists together. The excitement of that hour made up for weary muscles and torn trousers. The final count: 2688 birds representing 146 species. Last year was a fine clear day with a dozen veterans who chalked up 154 species. We felt satisfied, though, for we listed some eight new birds we hadn't seen the three previous years.

#### NOTES AND COMMENTS

Many of our members who are also members of the World Wildlife Fund, Indian National Appeal, must have seen a brochure in which we reprinted Peter Jackson's article 'A daysworth of Delhi birds' which appeared in Newsletter Vol. 11, No. 12, December 1971. The World Wildlife Fund hopes to bring out similar brochures dealing with the birds seen around other cities in India. Capt. N. S. Tyabji has offered to do one for the Hyderabad area. May I appeal to those members who are capable of the effort and knowledgeable enough about the bird fauna of their localities to make a similar attempt. Such check-lists, apart from their intrinsic value, are a great help towards promoting wildlife tourism.

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#### Mahim Creek

A strong effort continues to be made to save what is left of the Mahim Creek as a bird sanctuary. Memoranda have been sent to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra as well as the Municipal Commissioner, and the need to save this beautiful wetland was discussed in a meeting on Urbanization in Delhi convened by the National Committee on Science and Technology. It would be a great help if those of our readers who are familiar with the



beautiful birdlife inhabiting this mangrove studded creek, and who recognize the need to preserve this for recreation for our congested city, also write to the Municipal Commissioner and the Chief Minister. Only an alert public will be able to preserve the environment to which they are entitled.

## CORRESPONDENCE

' A castaway with birds '

In regard to the suggestion in Newsletter Vol. 12(2), February 1972, I am giving below the names of my ten favourite birds:

- |                                   |                        |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Whitebrowed Fantail Flycatcher | 6. Purple Sunbird      |
| 2. Pied Kingfisher                | 7. Magpie Robin        |
| 3. Yellowheaded Wagtail           | 8. Sirkeer Cuckoo      |
| 4. Tailor Bird                    | 9. Pied Crested Cuckoo |
| 5. Ashy Wren-Warbler              | 10. Golden Oriole      |

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Greylag Geese about Roorkee, U.P.

During winter Greylag Geese frequent a body of water about 12 km from Roorkee known as Thitla. During the earlier winters, I counted as many as 70 of them there at a time. They arrive at about 7 p.m. and fly away before sunrise. But as winter advances, the flock may remain there till 8 a.m. if not disturbed.

On 14th February 1972 I reached the spot at 6.30 a.m. (sunrise about 7.02 a.m.). The call of a solitary goose in the sky attracted my attention. After a while the geese started arriving, flying overhead, in flocks of 4, 24, 6 and 6 and all landed at the north end of the stretch of water (about 1 km x 200 metres). Taking cover behind wheat fields and behind a sugarcane field, I got within 100 metres of them and had a good look at them for about 10-15 minutes. A shikari, then, came from behind me and alerted them by the rustling in the sugarcane field. The geese took to wing along with a few hundred duck.

Besides Thitla, Kotwal (16 km), Gurukul Salaru (20 km) and Paonti (16 km) are some other spots in the area where geese and duck can be spotted during the winter.

A. A. Ansari  
Roorkee, U.P.

Nest and eggs of a Pariah Kite

A pair of Pariah Kites had a nest at a height of 30-40 ft in the fork of a peepul tree standing near my house. The nest was a platform of sticks and dry twigs lined inside with cotton. The two eggs which occupied the nest had a week's brooding when a neighbour climbed the tree on 28.xii and removed them. The eggs were bigger than the average common domestic fowl's, but not as big as those of a duck. One of them could hold as much as 1.55 oz. of water. The rounder part of the egg had blotches and specks of dark reddish colour, which looked like the blood stains received by the eggs at the time of laying. The rest of the shell had freckles of same colour much sparingly distributed.

T. V. Jose  
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# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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WATCHING BIRDS FROM A LAMBRETTA

V. G. Kartha

Peter Jackson might have toted up a terrific tally travelling around on his Toyota, but I would suggest the much slower two-wheeler for those not so keen-eyed and expert as P.J. It might appear incongruous watching birds when whizzing along at 50 km an hour (apart from being hazardous both to self and other road-users), but like the 25-over cricket matches so popular nowadays, these are the developments of modern fast living. Who can afford those long leisurely days of cricket watching or birdwatching for that matter?

Though I still find time (rarely of late) to get out on a long ramble along the countryside, exigencies of work and physical stamina constrain me to limit my observations to my daily scooter journey to and from work. I ride 9 km to work around 8 a.m. and return in the evening sometimes just when the flocks are flying home to roost. The road is lonely for the most part and borders a vast barren area interspersed with some green fields.

What greater pleasure than to enliven a dreary journey by looking up old friends and being reassured by their steadfastness. When you have ridden the same stretch more than a couple of thousand times - come rain, come shine - you get to know

every pebble and pothole, and you also get to know the bulbul, the blue jay and the pied bush chat that 'wave' to you as you pass by.

Compared to P.J. I am just a new born babe in the woods and my life list does not even total his day's tally. I have managed to identify just under a 100 species so far in Bhilai (Madhya Pradesh), some of it from my scooter. A sudden glimpse as you chug along - the strangeness of a bird in the familiar setting suddenly strikes you, and you hurriedly come to a stop, take out your note book and jot down.

The permanent residents along the way, almost like mile stones, are the Rollers. They are always seated hunched up on the electric wires overhead and at seemingly 'exact' intervals of a kilometre. And as if to show you that they aren't just drab nondescript knobs of insulators, one of them suddenly breaks into a brilliant blue and makes a dash in front of your eyes. You and your scooter are but passing nuisances to him to be borne with studied indifference. He just sits there on the ground, claws holding down his grub, wings spread and colours displayed; and he stares you balefully in the eye. Once in a while, if there is not traffic on the road, you might watch him rehearse his arial somersaults.

Other residents who could be relied upon to be seen in more or less the same spots day in and day out are the pied bush chats, the baybacked shrikes, the black drongos, the larks, the egrets and the green bee-eaters. As winter approaches the swallows and the swifts throng the air and race you on your noisy ill-equipped contraption. The sheer joie-de-vivre of the swallow warms the cockles of your heart and makes light your worries and woes.

The sight of the scooter apparently tickles the comic in a swallow. He swoops down on you out of nowhere and flies abreast hardly a couple of feet away for 10 or 15 seconds and then disdainfully pulls across and away from you with just a few flips of his sickle shaped wing. I have seen this display quite a number of times. Apart from the pied myna which sometimes exhibits a little bit of curiosity, no other bird has ever shown such playful characteristics. Once or twice I have had pied mynas flying across almost on collision course, but at the last moment when he realises his navigational error, he turns his head and cocks an eye at me. And then as if with a 'beg your pardon', he banks steeply and changes course. That instant when our relative speed is zero and I am 'face-to-face' with him, it is one of those thrilling moments that would almost make me Hindi-filmwise burst into song!

Some of the most interesting bird sights I first saw from the scooter. I have seen the kestrel hover motionless in the sky (I nearly ran into a jay-walking buffalo then), the white-backed vulture coming in to make a copy-book landing, the

3

blackbellied finch-lark practising his spectacular sky-dives and the great hordes of the short-toed lark rising from the ground like inverted rain.

Then there are those innumerable small incidents of bird-life that one normally does not take much cognizance of and which could yet give a clue to many a quaint quirk of individuality. Here is an excerpt from my notes: 'Curious incident; Redwattled Lapwing having a tiff with a crow; the latter is of course the villain of the piece. Lapwing sitting stiffly on the ground by the fence of Sastri Park near the cross-road. Crow sits atop electric pole close-by. Could sense the tension in the atmosphere - slow down scooter and stop. Birds ignore me. Lapwing decides it cannot stand presence of crow any longer; takes off to attack. Crow quickly retreats; lapwing in full pursuit and overhauls crow in a few seconds. Crow dodges and moves off; lapwing returns to the patch on the ground; crow circles in the air far off; probably 200 metres away. Lapwing doesn't like the sight of crow still hanging around; takes off again. Crow flees, but lapwing with deceptive slowness and lazy wing strokes reaches crow and buzzes it. Crow is now really in headlong flight. Lapwing finally gives up, apparently mollified, and returns. Settles down this time on a different patch of grass. Can't find out reason for all this 'anger' on part of lapwing. Can't see any nest anywhere - properly camouflaged to be sure'.

Here is another small vignette: 'A lone cormorant flying high over a tree-fringed tank suddenly wheels and circles over water, slowly dropping height - circles and circles - then quickly swoops down to the surface with a slight splash - takes a few gulps of water, looks around and promptly dives under. Does not come up for a minute and a half or so - then surfaces 10-15 metres away from the first spot. How interesting - this bird uses two completely alien environments for its daily life - up in the air and down under water. No wonder it rarely crosses man's path!'

Watching birds from a scooter is thus a large canvas filled with many such disconnected vignettes, but all together making up a beautiful and enthralling whole

#### HOW TO FOOL HUMANS IN THE FIELD. A few tips for man-baiters Rhona Gbate

Humans say we have very little brain and do everything by instinct. This is rather insulting, and they deserve to be fooled. The aim of this sport is to tantalize them and then prevent them identifying you, which oddly enough they seem to attach a lot of importance to.

To begin with the obvious, fly on from bush to bush just as they catch up with you on their evening walk. Their sight

is rotten, and it's easy to find out how close you can let them get, or to move on just as they are getting their binoculars adjusted.

Another ploy is to sit firmly on a twig in front of their veranda throughout their morning tea. The Law of Inverse Identifiability then comes into force. They will be so over-confident that when they go in to check in the book they will forget whether that white patch was on your rump or your wing and whether your beak was thick or slender.

Probably the dull coloured birds among us can get the most fun out of it. If you are a wren-warbler you can have them standing a few feet away indefinitely, trying to puzzle out which parts of you are ashy or rufous or fulvous or rusty. If you must be bright, then green is the best colour to choose. They will break their necks looking up into a leafy tree for a chloropsis or a coppersmith bird which they know perfectly well is there.

Of course if you are really striking, like a golden oriole or a paradise flycatcher, you should make sure your wife looks different, and send her out hunting when humans are around. Many small birds very sensibly have their wives look like sparrows, which is most irritating to the birdwatcher. Incidentally if you are a sparrow, choose the right moment to appear and he will write you down as 'very similar to a sparrow' without ever guessing that you really are one.

Or you can have 'phases' like some of the cuckoos, preferably reserving the more distinctive phase for when you have migrated. In fact you can learn a lot from the cuckoos who are experts at this sport. For some reasons foreigners feel sentimental about the 'English' cuckoo, just as Indians do about the koel, and both will take great pains to track a cuckoo down. They think it's easy because the calls are so distinctive, but the cuckoos have the sense to fly around silently most of the year, and when they do call do so from the depths of a leafy mango tree.

In fact the judicious use of calls is probably the best part of this game. Most humans haven't much memory for sounds and can easily be fooled and made to rush out-of-doors by an unexpected visit from a tree-pie or kingfisher to the garden. More subtle of course is to mimic the call of another bird, if possible after it has migrated; but you can only get fun out of this if they know the bird you are imitating. Perhaps best of all is just to go on saying Chip, chip as you hop along a hedge. It's surprising how much concealment can be got out of a hedge.

The beginners among us need not be discouraged. Remember that as their bird books get bigger and better, with intimidating Latin indexes and names like Grey Hypocolius, so does the ordinary birdwatcher get more and more confused. There are thirty-nine kinds of lark in their latest book and all practically identical.



## BIRDING IN THE BORIVLI NATIONAL PARK, BOMBAY

G. De

In response to the call of the Curator of the Bombay Natural History Society and of the Editor of the Newsletter I went to Kanheri Caves on the 23rd March for a 'Walk' and having missed the fellow-walkers because of 15 minutes' delay took a wood-cutters' track, which starts behind the Caves and ends up at the metalled road, almost half-way between the Kanheri Caves Crossing and the Vana-Kutir. This track runs along the middle of a well-wooded steep hillside and later cascades down through undulating forest. I chose this path with the hope of seeing Common Green Pigeon with yellow legs, which I saw once two years ago.

Birds that I saw during this walk were Jerdon's Chloropsis, Goldfronted Chloropsis, Rufous Woodpecker, Spotted Babbler, Blackheaded Oriole, Golden Oriole, Wood-Shrike, Large Cuckoo-Shrike, Whitebelled Drongo, Common Tree-Pie, Peacock and a male Sparrow-Hawk. There was no trace of deer.

In this part of the jungle the Spotted Babbler was pretty bold, so that I could watch it climbing 15 feet tree-top and singing. The Sparrow-Hawk was seen flying to a tree branch with a small mouse in its claws and finishing the breakfast before flying away again.

As expected, in this time of the year migratory flycatchers were not to be found. Golden Orioles and Sparrow-Hawks would presumably leave later. Incidentally is it wrong to distinguish between a Shikra and a Sparrow-Hawk by the presence and absence of a dark mesial line on white throat respectively? This problem of identification was raised by the Editor some months ago.

Six months of the year, from the middle of October to the middle of April is the effective birdwatching season of Bombay, unless, of course, one is interested in nests and babies of local birds. This is the period when we get visitors and have the possibility of enlarging the personal checklist. The season can, of course, be extended at both ends by about a month depending upon the year's weather condition.

Usually my watching territory is the region between the three lakes, Powai, Vihar and Tulsi. As I glance over the 'catches' of the departing season it appears that the reward has not been very mean.

The most interesting of these new finds was a Peregrine Falcon (Falco peregrinus), seen in the forenoon of the 26th December 1971, perched on a palm tree, overlooking Powai Lake. Yonder about a thousand Common Teals were floating on water and an Osprey was perching on an iron pole, posted among the rocks in the middle of the water. It was an idyllic scene of

the peregrine and ducks to watch in a sunny winter weather. During the half of an hour the peregrine changed its position by several inches once to recede in the shade and at the same time stretched its orange legs and preened its slaty back. Its bright coloured eyes were appearing as white luminous spots against the dark face with slaty black moustache, descending heavily. A jungle crow flew past the bird once, leaving unmistakable idea about its size.

On 5.iii.1972 I saw Blackwinged Kite in Vihar Lake area, trying to secure prey from perches on bare tops of middle sized trees, overlooking grassy banks. In fact, in the morning I saw one in the northeastern side of the lake and at about 11 a.m. one in the northwestern side, about 3 miles off from the earlier location. If it is the same bird, it indicates the rapidity with which these birds do change their place of hunting. Several weeks earlier a blackwinged kite was seen in the Indian Institute of Technology campus in an afternoon sitting on an electrical overhead line and eating a bloody catch.

Observation about a pair of Marsh Harriers over several months in the Vihar Lake area has already been reported. In the beginning of April a female Marsh Harrier has appeared in the Powai Lake area. As expected, this bird resembles a Pariah Kite, but for the whitish crown and throat and bright chocolate lower plumage. Its legs appear longer than those of kites. Wading and swimming birds fly away in fear, the moment they see Harrier above them.

During this season a harrier of about 20 inches has been seen in the Vihar Lake area. It was generally chocolate-brown in colour and had large white rump-patch. As is known, it could be a female of either Hen, Pale or Montagu's Harrier, clues for whose distinction in the field are not available in the literature. I wonder, whether the colour pattern under spreading wing could be of any help.

Among the land birds, this season's contribution to my checklist has been Ring Dove, Red Turtle Doves, Bluethroats, Stonechats and Streaked Fantail Warblers. All of them have been seen in the Vihar Lake area. A pair of Red Turtle Doves (*Streptopelia tranquebarica*) were seen on the 5th March 1971 feeding on stony dried grass-bed near the spot where motorists usually halt for birdwatching at Vihar Lake. Both the birds were brightly coloured with ashy grey head, nape, wing, rump and tail, vinous-red back and lower plumage and had dark half ring on neck. Obviously both of them were males. They were first feeding at one spot and being disturbed by my approach flew into a nearby tree (thus drew my attention to their presence). For the next 10 minutes they gauged the situation while cooing to each other and then flew to another spot 30 yards away when both the parties could have their breakfast maintaining a decent distance.

Duckwise Vihar Lake was poorer in this season, in spite of

the unusual visit of Brahminy Duck and usual trips of Spot-bills. In the earlier few seasons one could see Common Teal nearing 10,000 and Pintail nearing 1000. In this season teal were only a few thousands and the number of pintails was less than 100. On the other hand Powai Lake received great crowd of duck in this season. There were several thousands of common teal and several hundreds of pintail in the peak of the season. In the earlier few seasons not a single pintail was seen and the number of common teal was never more than 300. Also in this season a pair of Coots and a dozen of Fantail/Pintail Snipe were among the rare guests at Powai Lake.

However, Powai Lake did not have unmixed blessings. I have seen only once an Openbill Stork and not more than two Snakebirds. In the earlier years half a dozen openbills and two dozen Snakebirds used to be guests over several months. Not a single Common Tern (Sterna hirundo) or Caspian Tern has been seen in this season, which used to impart colour in otherwise drab crowd of Gullbilled terns and Black- and Brown-headed gulls in earlier years.

On the 5th March and 12th March this year, a group of three large sized gulls has been seen at the edge of Vihar Lake with yellow legs, red-tipped yellow bill and black-tipped ashy grey wings. In the first week one of them had black head and neck with prominent white ring round eyes while the other two had smoky heads. By the next week the other two also acquired black head and neck. I am hesitating to dub these birds as Great Blackheaded Gulls (Larus ichthyaetus) since their length was 22-24 inches (comparing with nearby Blackheaded Gull's) whereas the Handbook of Ali and Ripley states it as 26-28 in.

During the spring migration the extensive mudflat, created by the receding water of Powai Lake provides an intermediate halting station for many a wader and a large number of Garganey teal. The passing season is just unfolding this drama. Garganey are already there while a dozen of pintails are still finding enjoyable enough. For the last ten days of March about three dozen Blacktailed Godwits have appeared on the stage and four Avocets for the last three days. These two species belong to my list of new finds. It may be noted that the most conspicuous feature of avocets is their bright black and white stripes on back and wing since their up-curving of their thin bill may be missed from a distance even through binoculars.

' A CASTAWAY WITH BIRDS '

K. S. Lavkumar

Joining the game of selecting ten favourites on an ocean island, I would like to take with me a flock of White-eyes, a party of Scarlet Minivets, a few Whitebellied Minivets (they are ridiculously confiding and live lower down so that one



does not get a crimp in the neck watching them), a pair of Paradise Flycatchers (white male), a pair of Whitebrowed Fantail Flycatchers or any of the other species of this form, Dusky Crag Martins (very confiding and cuddly creatures), Little Ring Plovers, a rabble of Crab Plovers to run about over the reefs when the sea goes out and to make burrows in the sand dunes for nesting, a pair of smart and energetic Dhayals to sing through the summer above my cavern entrance and lastly a pair of Whitebellied Sea Eagles to circle the heavens above me and to keep me spell bound with their magnificent flight along the surf-washed cliffs where I would go angling fish, or collecting oysters and crabs for my dinner. As for the optionals, I would certainly like to have a pair of Redheaded Merlins, but would have to regretfully leave them behind because they would make short shrift of the other small birds. If there is a small freshwater lake, then I would ask for a pair of Cotton Teal (they are so cuddly and toy-like that I never fail to pause to watch them feeding or in fast low flight). Finally, it is a good thing the birds do not know how to read as otherwise I would certainly hurt the feelings of so many other species which have given me hours of joy through my life .... the tits, the laughing thrushes, the sunbirds, the dippers, the redstarts, the orioles, the larks, the drongos, and all the other graceful, beautiful, sweet voiced, amusing, grotesque, grand, elegant and just simple homely birds. Sorry I will not go to the desert island and will instead spend the summers in Manali and the winters in some part of India.

#### NESTING OF THE YELLOWFRONTED PIED or MAHRATTA WOODPECKER

Datta Manchekar

I had a very rewarding visit to the Pongam Valley (Borivli National Park, Bombay) on 16 April, when I saw a pair of Yellowfronted Pied or Mahratta Woodpeckers (Picoides mahrattensis) feeding their nest young.

The nest is excavated in the main trunk of a leafless, live Silk Cotton (Salmalia malabarica) and is about 7 metres above the ground, just below where the tree trunk commences to branch. The nest entrance is about 1.5-2 inches in diameter, and all round it the nesting birds have chipped off the bark, with the result that the nest-entrance appears to be placed in the centre of a red-coloured patch. The nest tree stands a little distance off the north end of Culvert No. 20, on the right of the road leading to the Deer Park from the Milk Colony.

The male was seen flying in either with berries or insects in his beak. He alighted on a neighbouring tree, and having



taken a good look around, flew and settled on one of the branches of the nest tree. From here he flew down to the trunk of the nest tree, and either slid or circled round to the nest entrance, depending upon how he was situated in regard to the nest entrance. On reaching the nest entrance he thrust his head in and thus stood for a couple of seconds, and soon disappeared with the food into the nest. Before leaving the nest, he would thrust his head out of the entrance hole, and taking a look all round fly off.

I was gathering the impression that the chivalrous male was feeding the incubating hen. To test this I approached the nest tree and started banging the trunk with a stone, simulating its being axed down, in order to dislodge the bird inside the nest. This however was of no avail, and no bird emerged.

Shortly after I spotted another individual with a wriggling larva in its beak fly in and settle in a tree close by. The absence of scarlet in its occipital crest revealed it to be a female. Evidently it was the female of the pair, also engaged in feeding nest young. The male was not averse to being openly observed. But the female appeared to be more wary. When she spotted the observer she became very agitated, and kept on hopping from branch to branch, never even attempting to land on the nest tree. In such circumstances she gulped down the beakful herself instead of delivering it to the young and flew off only to return a couple of minutes later with another juicy beakful.

A pair of Yellowthroated Sparrows (Petronia xanthocollis) lurked about the nest vicinity. It would be interesting to wait and see if they would occupy this nest once the woodpeckers have vacated the site.

#### NOTES AND COMMENTS

##### ' Castaway with birds '

Most readers appear to have enjoyed this feature, but I have a letter from Lt Col. A. David who disapproves of this. According to him we should have nothing to do with such ' and infantile and imaginary game(s) '. He wants us to ' continue on factual figures .... otherwise the very purpose of the Newsletter will be defeated '. I hope that Lt Col. A. David does not represent the views of the majority of our readers, for I must confess that I was seriously thinking of plunging into the game myself, and hope to do so one of these days.

## CORRESPONDENCE

Nest of Purple Sunbird (*Nectarinia asiatica*)

At the moment of writing, 8th April 1972, I have a Purple Sunbird's nest in my garden with two nestlings. Last year they bred in my garden and raised two broods in the same nest. This nest is rather modern in its construction, the outer plastering is largely of paper pieces.

K. S. Lavkumar

[There appears to be nothing 'modern' in the Purple Sunbird plastering its nest with pieces of paper. Mr J. S. Ser-rao draws my attention to such a record which was published a hundred years ago. R. M. Adam who reported it wrote: 'It is curious how fond these birds (Purple Sunbirds) are of tacking on pieces of paper, and here and there a bright coloured feather from a parrot, or a roller on the outside of their nests. When in Agra a bird of this species built a nest on a loose piece of thatch cord in my verandah, and on the side of the nest, stuck on like a signboard, was a piece of a torn up letter with "My dear Adam" on it' (Stray Feathers 1: 374; 1873). - Ed.]

ERRATUM

Newsletter Vol. 12, No. 4, April 1972. Page 2, 3rd and 4th lines from top, for Rufoustailed Chat read Rufoustailed Finch Lark.

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# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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VOL XII NO. 6 JUNE 1972





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NESTING REDWATTLED LAPWINGS, May-June 1971

D. Ray

6.v.1971. Walking around the wall of the Locomotive Shed at New Katni (Katni, M.P.) I saw a solitary redwattled lapwing slinking off quietly from a pile of rubble. Something about the head-tucked-in gait of the bird coupled with the sharp tee-ti-too-wit calls of another one outside the wall aroused my suspicion. On going over to the pile I found four eggs placed close together in a small hollow. They were slate grey in colour with blackish spots and blotches all over the blunt end - the visible ends.

Further more circumspect visits (7th, 10th and 12th) always followed a set pattern. On my approach the bird standing outside the wall would start its warning tee-ti-too-wit, tee-ti-too-wit. The bird on the eggs would slink off and 15 to 20 seconds later would fly over the wall to add its protests to that of its mate. The direction of its flight never gave any indication of the position of the nest.

There were other pairs of lapwings in various stages of courtship on the dry stony land around. One day I found two pair squabbling. One bird would take up its position on a slight rise while another would dive at it with tee-ti-too-wit calls. The bird on the ground would take a head-down threatening posture reminiscent of fighting cocks. After two or three swoops the flying bird would settle and the other bird would start swooping at it.

On the 18th things were strangely quiet at the nest. Sure enough there was no sentry and no bird on the nest. The nest, a shallow dish about 7 to 8 cm in diameter, made up of small

stones was empty. There were no eggshells lying around.

On the 20th of May I was transferred to Lucknow and put up in a room in a rest house with a large field behind it. From my window, the next day I watched a pair of noisy redwattled lapwings trying to chase away a couple of stray dogs. No broken wing display this. The birds would keep swooping at them till they moved on. Sometimes they would land a couple of metres ahead of the dogs and scream at them until the dogs got closer. When the dogs had gone, one of the settled, walked over to a bare patch in the grass and squatted. There was a nest there.

There was one egg in the scrape that day, grey with dark blotches all over it. The others came on 23rd, 24th and 26th till there were four in number. The nest itself was barely 3 metres from a private road and as a result the birds were often disturbed.

For the first three or four days the birds would only occasionally sit on the eggs. When they did, it would only be for a few minutes at a time. As this happened more often at midday it was probably an effort to protect the eggs from the hot sun. Usually when any of the birds were near the nest ( $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  m away) they could be seen picking up small pebbles and throwing them in the direction of the nest. This habit persisted during the incubation. The bird on the eggs if undisturbed would often pick up pebbles within reach and drop them near the nest.

After the clutch was complete, incubation began in earnest. One of the birds would quietly walk up to the nest and tip up <sup>few</sup> its tail as it moved a pebbles or the eggs. Then it would straddle the eggs, tarsi pointing outwards, fluff up the feathers of its breast and settle down. Within minutes the feathers of the crown and back would be fluffed against the May sun. Its mate meanwhile would stand ruffling and preening its feathers near a small pool of water 50 metres away.

The trials of the birds began with the incubation. Any street dog which happened to stray near had to be chased away. The screams at this time as well as at other times of danger were not the usual tee-ti-too-wit calls. Instead it was a sharp teeank-keeank many times repeated interspersed by tee-ti-too-wits. They were not very adept at leading the dogs away and sometimes only managed to lead them closer to the nest. However by then the birds would be calling frenziedly so the bewildered dogs looking up in the air would never smell or see the nest.

Common crows would hang around, usually because of a dustbin nearby but often also with the eggs in mind. At the sight of a suspicious looking crow the bird on the eggs would crouch lower, while its mate would pursue the crow. It would scream keeank-keeank and at other times tit-tit-tit-tit-ing in rage chase the crow until it swerved out of the way. The lapwings though fast fliers cannot turn as fast as the crows. Before .

the pursuing bird had turned around the crow would be on its tail. It would usually take several passes by the parents before crows would fly off to look for easier picking.

On one morning one lapwing was caught alone on the nest by a crow. The mate was nowhere around. The crow sidled innocently up to the nest until it was just outside pecking range. Then it started working its way towards the tail of the incubating bird, who called frantically. The lapwing kept turning on its eggs always facing the crow. Finally it suddenly got off the eggs and made a lunge at the crow, which flew off.

Kites were also pursued and I have seen one of the lapwings chasing one flying at least 25 metres up.

A strange lapwing visited the nest one day. As it approached, the bird on 'off-duty' got between it and the nest. The intruder walked round the nest but the second bird always interposed itself between the intruder and its mate. After a couple of rounds the stranger flew off.

Human being contributed to the disturbance with malis chopping weeds next to the nest and women cutting grass in the vicinity. Children came, attracted by the constant calls, to pinch eggs and had to be chased away. The chowkidars and cooks would think nothing of sitting 3 metres from the nest waiting for the birds to come back!

The birds took turns incubating the eggs. There would be no ceremony at the change of duty. The fresh bird would walk (never fly) up to the nest. As soon as he or she was close the bird on the nest would get up and walk off while the fresh one would squat on the eggs.

In front of the rest house there is a large and rather unkempt lawn. At dusk one bird would come to feed here. It would trip along upending to pick up insects every few steps. These were probably grasshoppers which were very common. From time to time it would tug out, kill and then slowly swallow earthworms.

On the 21st June evening the lapwings made an unusual amount of noise when two teenagers walked by. Usually this pair of birds would not make much protest when people went near their nests. A check revealed that one egg had hatched. The other two hatched the next day, one very early in the morning and the other around 10 o'clock. The fourth egg had disappeared somewhere around the 12th or 13th.

The newborn chicks had a bedraggled look and could not walk around. Within an hour their feathers fluffed out and they could be seen toddling near the nest. They were the size of day old 'desi murgli chicks', only longer in the neck and legs. The back and wings were earthy brown, speckled and mottled in black, with a cap on the head of a similar colour. The neck, and underparts were white with a faint black necklace across the breast.

In the first three or four hours they did not react instantly to their parents' danger calls. Six hours after the last



chick was born they were led away through the field to a patch of long grass 70 metres away. By then they had become more careful and would crouch immediately on calls from their parents. Their camouflage in this position was excellent. A chick lying doggo in the grass looked like a patch of old cowdung.

The family moved further afield the next day. Their movement and my subsequent transfer brought observation to an end.

## BIRDING IN MYSORE IN MID JUNE

D. A. Stairmand

With the rains only slight the area in and around Mysore City was climatically ideal during the middle of June 1971.

As in other cities there were large flights of birds from and to Mysore city early morning and late evening. I very much enjoyed seeing small flights of Black Ibis at those times and House Swifts were great fun to watch. 'balling up' in the sky in the evenings both noisily and joyously. Grey Hornbills were quite common in any parkland and I can never regard these birds as ordinary. I am always delighted to see -- and, if possible, watch them. The tank in which the Maharajah's fine elephants were scrubbed had many birds -- dabchicks, cotton teal, pheasant-tailed jacanas, pied kingfishers, whiskered terns, egrets, cormorants, redumped swallows, etc.

A short visit outside the city to Ranganthitoo Bird Sanctuary revealed a large number of nesting birds in a delightful setting -- well worth more than one visit. The birds mainly nest in trees on islets in the middle of the water. The sanctuary is really formed by the backwaters of the river Cauvery. The birds nesting were: white ibis, night heron, cattle egret, small and little egret, pond heron, little cormorant, openbill stork, darter. Breeding activities were going on at all stages from nest building right through to fledgelings making their first uncertain flights. In adult birds there was much splendour of plumage and finery of dress; and I always find immature dress in all its stages, quite fascinating. We all know the glory of egrets in breeding dress but perhaps a few readers have not yet seen how wonderful the darter's silvery grey streaks on its back are when the bird is in its best plumage. There were some Painted Storks and Spoonbills but they did not appear to be nesting then awhile. Crows appeared to form the main danger to eggs and chicks or squabs as although there were a number of brahmny kites around I saw no other raptors. The only other possible danger was, I suppose, from the mongoose. In all it was a very happy scene with several trees filled to bursting point by birds and nests and many other attractive birds were around, including river terns and lesser whistling teal.

I spent most of my visit in Mysore birding near the KRS Dam



and along the shingle banks of the river Cauvery. Here, I could birdwatch all day -- there was always much of great interest and beauty to watch and dwell upon. From one spot just below the dam I could watch Pied, Common and Whitebreasted kingfishers, Cliff, Redrumped and Wiretailed swallows, Whitenecked and Painted storks, Brahminy Kite, Pratincole, Large Pied Wagtail, Darter, White Ibis, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Little Cormorant and several others. Walking along the shingle banks of the Cauvery was always quite exciting. If cormorants were not flying or indulging in communal fishing they were resting on these banks in parties up to 500+. Once I approached a party of c. 200 River Terns sitting in close order on the shingle banks. As I got closer they all flew off - rather disappointingly (but according 'to the book') they were only resting, not nesting. Two 'breeding' incidents did, however occur a little later. As I approached a Little Ringed Plover it pretended to sit on eggs. When I reached (what I thought to be) the precise spot I could discover neither eggs nor young but then saw the bird squatting over another imaginary nest or young about 30 yards further on. This procedure was repeated four times until eventually I tired of the bird 'putting me on'. However, I was not to be let off so lightly as now a Small Pratincole lured me on with a fascinating 'broken wing' act for which I gave it full marks. Small Pratincoles were in only small numbers on this visit but well-worth looking out for and spotbills were fairly common. Moving away from the water many different species of birds could be seen - baya weavers building, shikras lurking in trees, parties of green bee-eaters and the exoticness of rollers, purplerumped sunbirds and hoopoes and many of those other birds that are part and parcel of the Indian scene and which we all know -- and, I hope, appreciate -- so well.

In addition to the birds there was plenty to see in and around Mysore and, in fact, I had a perfectly restful, tranquil and engaging stay of over one week.

#### ECOLOGICAL STUDY OF REST AND ROOST BEHAVIOUR OF THE PEAFOWL (PAVO CRISTATUS). Part 1

Indra Kumar Sharma

Abstract. Rest and roost behaviour of a large bird like the peafowl is of much interest. This problem was taken up at different typical habitats in different seasons to study the effect of environment. It was observed that there is a significant relation between the size of body, and rest and roost behaviour. The peafowl has adapted well to arid habitat for rest and roost.

Introduction. Ecological study of rest and roost behaviour of birds, particularly of as large a bird as the peafowl has not been studied by ornithologists. Fin (1911) narrated that the

peafowl rests on a large tree, Baker (1930), Whistler (1949), Salim Ali (1968) and Dharmakumarsinhji (1956) narrated general natural history of the peafowl in which large tree with open branches is mentioned as favourite roost tree of the peafowl. Rest and roost are significant parts of the daily routine of a bird, these differ with types of birds and environments in relation to size of bird. Hence I studied the interesting problem of ecological aspects of rest and roost behaviour of the peafowl.

Methods and procedure. Several types of habitats were selected around Jodhpur within a radius of 15 km to study the effect of various environments on rest and roost behaviour of the peafowl. 7 x 50 binoculars were used to observe from a distance natural activities without disturbance. Jodhpur is situated at 26°18'N., 73°02'E. and is 243 metres above sea level. It is a semi-arid region having thorny scrub area with several green oases of large gardens and farms.

Rest is a significant part of daily activities. It was observed that the peafowl takes rest in two ways: Minor rest for a short while for relaxation and Major rest for a long time for complete relaxation.

Minor rest. It was observed that when the peafowl gets a little tired after long walks in search of food or due to tiresome activities like dancing, it stands calmly for c. 30 seconds to 5 minutes (usually 1.30 minutes) for this rest. During the rest it may scratch itself and arrange its plumes or observe activities of the surroundings concerning it.

Major rest. It was observed that when a peacock is satisfied from hunger, or tired after a long journey in search of food or when the sun is scorching hot, it takes a long major rest at a shady site. It was noted that during summer, major rest period (lowered activity period) commences about 8.30 hours and lasts till 17.30 hours, and during winter from 10.00 hours to 15.30 hours. It was observed that major rest period varied with environments in the habitat. In shady groves peafowl tired less and remained active for a much longer time. At such places peafowl were observed active during midday too, and taking complete rest for a short while (10 to 25 minutes) between 10.30 hours to 14.30 hours in summer, and from about 12 hours to 14 hours in winter. After complete rest peafowl again become quite active in the afternoon in shady areas. During complete rest peafowl sit down calmly and occasionally take naps otherwise during prolonged major rest peafowl stand calmly or do less strenuous activities as arranging plumes, scratching or trying to woo opposite sex or pick up food grain nearby.

Relation of age, sex with rest. It was observed that chicks get exhausted soon. They frequently take rest by prostrating, neck outstretched, on the ground as if they were sick, and again becoming active after a few minutes. Subadults were found active in nature but taking enough rest frequently in short

stretches. Adults took rest at long intervals for medium duration when necessary. Peahens were observed less active and so also resting less frequently but their major rest periods were found comparatively longer than those of cocks. Female chicken also showed the same tendency as female adults, and male chicken as male adults.

Sites of rest. It was observed that cool shady places, particularly lonely corners, were favourite rest site of the peafowl. In gardens the peafowl prefers to sit under dense shrubs like bougainvillea (shrub trained), Caesalpinia pulcherrima, Table Trees of Mango (Mangifera indica), Albizia lebbek, Azadirachta indica and Tamarindus indica are favoured and suitable roost tree like Peepal (Ficus religiosa) and Banyan tree (F. bengalensis) are much favoured. Deserted human dwellings are good rest resorts for peafowl. In hill areas peafowl were observed resting in the shady side of rock or shrub available there. In arid regions where suitable rest sites are not available, the shady sides of Capparis aphylla, Euphorbia caudicifolia, Zizyphus numularia, Salvadora persica, as well as of walls or rocks are sites for rest.

Method and duration of rest. It has already been discussed that while at rest the peafowl remains calm for a few seconds (10 to 30 seconds). During major rest, peafowl either sit calmly or remain inactive for more than 5 minutes up to 25 minutes. When peafowl like to take complete rest, they sit with folded limbs and necks folded backwards for 5 to 10 minutes. It was noted that the duration of rest has significant relation with environment. In cool shady areas minor rest is less frequent and major rest lasts a shorter time as peafowl get less exhausted. In favoured sites they make rapid recovery from tiredness; remain active in midday also.

Relation of rest with size of body. It has already been discussed above that when compared to smaller birds the peafowl takes rest (minor) less frequently but for longer time and the midday major rest lasts longer (about 9 hours in summer). A medium sized bird like parrot and crow were observed taking minor rest for a comparatively shorter time (30 to 90 seconds) than the peafowl (large bird). The smaller birds like Tailor birds (Orthotomus sutorius), Sunbirds (Nectarinia asiatica) and Ashy Wren-Warbler (Prinia socialis) were found very active taking minor rest only for less than 90 seconds. During major rest periods lasting  $2\frac{1}{2}$  hours or less, they do not remain quite motionless like large birds. Thus comparative study reveals that larger sized birds take rest for longer periods and during major rests large birds remain inactive for longer periods whereas small birds remain inactive only for very short intervals of time.

Relation of size of body of bird with site for rest. It was observed that large birds rest on large open branched trees or under large sized shrubs whereas small birds (as house sparrows, tailor birds and sunbirds rest under clusters of leaves in a



branch, small shrub or cleft of rock. Therefore it must be noted that large birds find it difficult to find suitable rest sites as the choice is limited.

Relation between size of body and methods of rest. As discussed earlier the peafowl takes minor rest by standing calmly for a few minutes (1 to 3 minutes) at a suitable site but a small bird like the house sparrow or sunbird rests by stopping activities for some seconds (30 to 90 seconds) only, otherwise light activity serves as minor rest. A large bird takes complete rest by sitting down on ground, with folded legs, for longer periods whereas a small bird takes complete rest by standing calmly briefly naps. Thus size of body has significant relation with method of rest.

Activities while at rest. During rest a peafowl sits calmly but vigilantly looks around, as surrounding activities such as coming of enemy or availability of food (feeder comes) or arrival of mate may be of some concern to it. While at rest it mostly scratches itself or arranges plumes. The peafowl feels pleasure in scratching and getting scratched by another particularly of the opposite sex. During major rest it occasionally takes naps.

Roost. Peafowl being of large size their methods of roosting were found significantly different to those of small birds.

Timings of roost. It was observed that roosting began 20 minutes before sunset and lasted till 25 to 30 minutes past sunset. Peahen particularly with chicken climb earlier. Stray lazy peacocks roost last about 25-30 minutes past sunset, they get late in satisfying their hunger. Peafowls begin to move towards roost when sun begins to get below 10° in the west; they reach the roost site when the sun is about to set. They move about close to the roost to pick up last morsels of food to prepare for the nightly fast. It was observed that on overcast days peafowls roost 10-15 minutes earlier as darkness prevails earlier.

(To be continued)

#### NOTES AND COMMENTS

Very often, after a casual glance, an unfamiliar bird which superficially resembles an overly common bird is dismissed from our thoughts as a sparrow, crow or kite. A second and more careful look can at times be quite rewarding.

Two notes from Mr T. V. Jose are cited as examples.

' One morning I was looking over the backwaters of the sea close to my residence at Colaba. There is a mud embankment, bordered with lantana, separating the open sea from a more placid sheet of water to my right. The place was crowded with noisy sparrows and crows.

' Then I saw silhouetted against the morning sun a kite-like bird circling around. As the silhouette drifted towards me



I could make out its whitish colour. The bird made several swooping attempts to secure surfacing fish without actually hitting the water. Perhaps the fish eluded the bird. The bird was recognized as an Osprey (Pandion haliaetus) not commonly seen visiting this sea shore.

' The osprey was attacked first by a jungle crow without any success and later by two pariah kites which obviously considered the stranger as an intruder. The osprey although very agile on its wings could not stand against so much opposition and left the site.

' On another morning, I was watching a depression near the holiday camp and adjacent to the sea. Here there was a good growth of Typha latifolia spread out like a paddy field. Soon I saw a crow-like bird struggling in a patch of low wet grass. As I came nearer I saw that excepting for its black coloration it had no resemblance to a crow. The jerky movement of its body and stubby tail without any frontal white colour made me think that it was a kora or water cock and not a whitebellied waterhen. As it flew off into the Typha latifolia bush, the typical white on the wing-ridge was visible and confirmed the identification. Next day I saw it being chased by waterhens. '

#### CORRESPONDENCE

##### ' Nesting of the Yellowfronted Pied or Mahratta Woodpecker '

With reference to the note by Mr Manchekar (May 1972) on the nest of the Mahratta Woodpecker some more observations on the same nest, near culvert No. 20.

On Sunday, 5th March, my wife Mira, myself and Mr and Mrs Makarand Majumdar were walking down from the Deer Park, when we noticed a Mahratta Woodpecker on this tree. Mira pointed out the hole in the tree and suggested that it might be his nest. Though we waited nearly ten minutes, the woodpecker was too shy and would not go near the hole. We went away towards Aarey and on our way back about an hour later, we met Mr Serrao. We mentioned to him the possible nest as we walked back towards the Deer Park. After culvert No. 20 we moved softly and sure enough the woodpecker was there at the hole again. He peeped in and went away. While we watched we saw yellow-throated sparrows, one male and one female, also hover around the same spot. The female sparrow then went into the hole and came out. While the sparrows were around, the woodpecker was on the same tree watching calmly. There was no fight, not even excitement. We were wondering whose nest it was!

On Sunday, 26 March, we went to the same spot again around

9 a.m. We squatted by the road, watching the hole in the tree. Soon the woodpecker peeped out and flew away. When he came back he landed on the adjacent tree and gradually hopped around to his nest, perhaps so as not to attract attention to his nest. We watched him go in and out several times but did not see either the female nor the yellow-throated sparrows we had seen going in the previous time.

I wonder what the relation between the sparrows and the woodpecker is. The woodpecker made the hole, the sparrows went in for some time and then the woodpecker made his nest in it. Do the sparrows do something to make the hole suitable for the woodpecker's nest?

S. S. Kalbag  
Ruia Park, Juhu, Bombay

### Arrival of the Pitta in Bombay

Today (22.v.1972) evening at about 7.30 p.m. our neighbour's gardener showed me a bird which he caught on the terrace in the morning. I recognized it as the Indian Pitta because I had seen it once at Khandala in the St Xavier garden. The gardener had tied one of its legs with a string and wanted me to keep it in a cage. I explained to him that this bird could not be kept in a cage and told him to let it off. Dr Salim Ali writes in his book that its local migrations appear to be controlled by the SW. monsoon.

B. B. Palkhiwalla  
785A, Dadar, Bombay, 14

Observation of the Pitta in the pre-monsoon month of May has been made several times. D. A. Stairmand reports in Newsletter Vol. 10(7) and again in Vol. 11(6) after specially waiting for the birds the next year at the same time and place. Z. R. Futehally reports in Vol. 9(6) observing a Pitta in May.

Perhaps Mr Palkhiwalla will have the luck to see the same Pitta in his neighbour's garden next May. -- Ed.7

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Zafar Futehally  
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Bombay 58

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# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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THE WEAVER BIRD. A trend into the anatomy of the bird's nest

Br A. Navarro, S.J.

The large bulk of the weaver population is confined to the African Continent with 95 species. These birds are named for their highly complex nest construction, but most of them do not weave; they construct large and crude conglomerations of sticks and straws which at a distance can be mistaken for huts. In India the weavers are represented by five species, and some of them, I presume to say, are the best weavers. Among the Indian weavers the tussle for this qualification is between the Indian Baya (Ploceus philippinus) and the Blackthroated Weaver Bird (Ploceus bengalensis). Nevertheless, in my opinion the best weaver is the Indian Baya. It often seems that we underestimate the value and importance of the weaver's nest.

Some ornithologists have observed how a male weaver went so far as to destroy its nest because it was not accepted by female, and to build another nest in the same spot or very near it; we also have evidence given by Dr Salim Ali of a male weaver destroying its unaccepted nest.

In June of last year (1970) in this paper I have given an account of some observations made on the Baya and on its nest, but at that time my observations were confined to the course followed in the construction of the nest. Since then I have often wondered whether it could be possible to know the approximate number of fibres that a weaver required for its nest and to know the process of weaving.

I requested some friends to make an attempt at unweaving a nest; some, in fact, did try, but they all gave up. So, finally, I decided to do it myself. I selected an old nest that was in good condition. The nest had been fixed on a thin branch of a babul tree. I will classify this as a standard nest, that is, one without deformity or irregularity. First, I started from the tube but soon I came to the conclusion that I was on the wrong track and that the unweaving operation had to start from the same spot where the weaver started the construction work. At this stage the main task was to unweave the nest without breaking or damaging the fibres. The starting point was really the most difficult part of the whole

operation. At the very outset, we found the fibres were woven round a few babul thorns and from this point the loop that is the foundation and the whole support of the nest, has its origin. About 100 mm from this starting point there were the broader fibres 3 mm wide coiled round the neck of the nest. Once the coiled fibres were uncoiled, it was possible to start pulling the fibres off at random. The fibres that offered the slightest resistance were left alone, and at times, by pulling the fibres from another direction, they came off easily. At the same time, we opened some other nests from the opposite side of the retort-shaped structure and some others from the middle of the nest. All the nests were opened by means of a pair of scissors, starting from the end of the tube and going to the beginning of the nest. In this way we could obtain a clear view of the inner part and a better understanding of the whole construction of the nest. The nests were all very similar in shape and size. The weaving system seems to be rather complex, the material used

View A

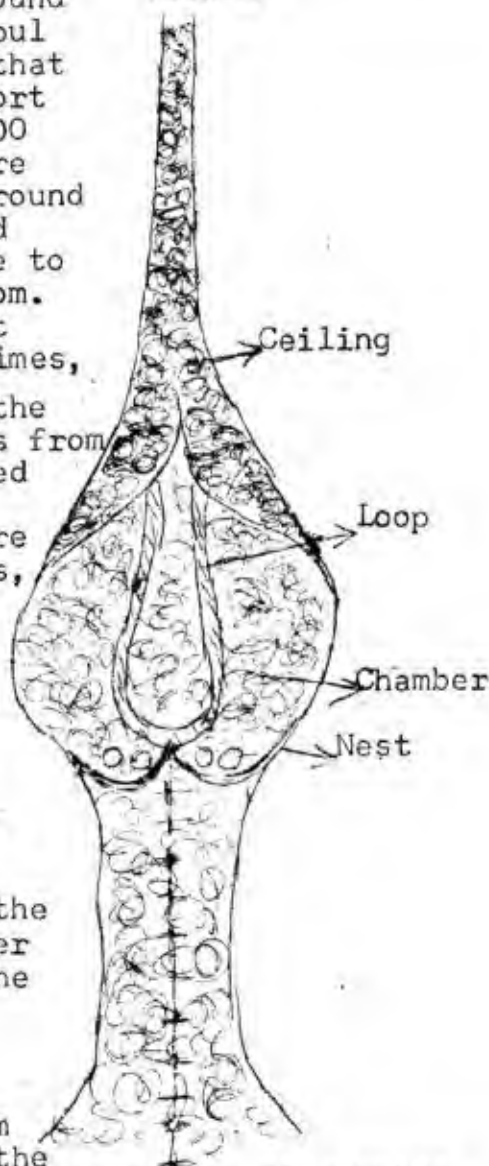


Fig. 1. Opening by the side of the chamber without cutting the loop

varies from locality to locality.

The broader and coarsest fibres from 2 to 3 mm wide were used to form the heavy canopy that is the top of the nest. From the points where the ceiling joins the side walls of the nest, downwards, the materials used were thinner, from

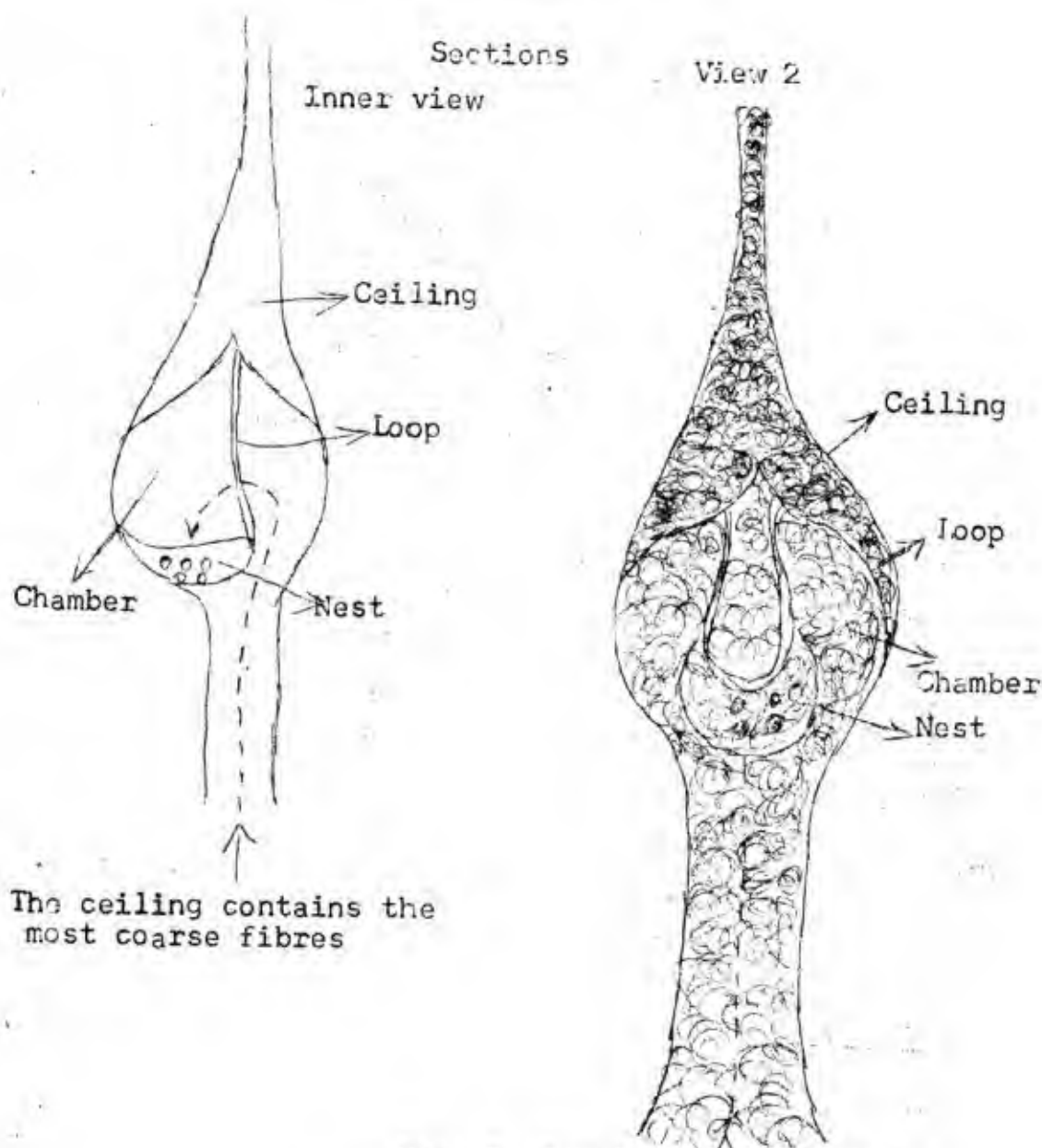


Fig. 2. Opening by the opposite side of the chamber

$\frac{1}{2}$  to 1 mm wide. If we divide the nest into two sections, the upper and the lower, we find the upper section to be bulkier and more solid and hence more rigid; this lends the nest certain proportions and stiffness and stability which on stormy and windy days enables the nest to sway pendulum-like, but prevents it from somersaulting. The walls of the nest by the side of the retort-shape are thicker than the opposite wall; the end of the loop is where the cup for the eggs is attached and its position comes to be almost at the centre of the tube and not by the side as may appear from the outside.

The outside of the nest is really finished with large thin fibres, most of which are woven downwards, some crossways and

now and then, there are some fibres woven around the nest. The inner walls were nicely finished with a layer of thin and short fibres and the cup for the eggs was woven with the finest and shortest of fibres. The weaver never cuts any fibres when weaving the outer side of the nest, if the fibres are too long, then on reaching the retort-shaped part, the weaver bends the fibres upwards or sideways.

I will consider the tube as an appendix to the nest since on unweaving the nest I could not find any traces of long fibres from the main body of the nest; most of the material used in the weaving of the tube and fusing it to the main body of the nest, are rather short and thin; this perhaps may be the reason why the woven texture of the tube is so loose and untidy. Considering the tube as an appendix, I do not mean to say that it serves no purpose. It is a simple safety device to safeguard the occupant from the attacks of the wandering predators and the casual visits of the barbets, parakeets, mynas, and some other birds that always hunt for ready-made holes for their breeding purposes and roosting spots.

The total number of fibres (with reference to the unwoven nest) used by the male weaver alone, was 5567; during the unweaving process, the fibres were sorted into separate groups: (a) the wider; (b) the thinner; thereafter each of the two groups were further classified into longer and shorter. The thinner fibres were, because of dehydration, of a circular shape. That is why we can only give a single measurement.

(a) The Wider Group

		<u>Breadth</u>	<u>Thickness</u>
First assortment			
	1	3.45 mm	0.25 mm
Larger	2	2.00	0.17
	3	1.05	0.13
	4	1.04	0.15
Second assortment			
	1	1.00 mm	0.10 mm
Shorter	2	0.75	0.15
	3	0.50	0.15
	4	0.40	0.17

(b) The Thinner Group

First assortment			
	1	nil	0.11 mm
Larger	2	"	0.12
	3	"	0.15
	4	"	0.22



(b) The Thinner Group. (contd)

		<u>Breadth</u>	<u>Thickness</u>
Second assortment			
Shorter	1	nil	0.02 mm
	2	"	0.06
	3	"	0.09
	4	"	0.10

The length of the larger fibres ranged from 800 mm to 500 mm. The middle sized from 500 to 200 mm, and the smaller ones from 300 mm to 30 mm.

How these measurements were carried out

We selected at random several fibres from each assortment and considering the average, four fibres were taken from each group. These measurements were carried out by Dr Richard Pinto of Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Bombay. I am grateful to Dr Richard Pinto for this willingness on his part and his generous cooperation.








The manner in which the weaver makes the fibres is well-known: it nips a small slit in the grass blade or palm leaf and tears off the fibre by flying away from the blade, with the nipped end in its beak. There were many fibres which half way through were further subdivided into two finer branches and some even into three. How does the weaver accomplish this?

The weaver does all the weaving entirely with its beak. Speaking in today's language, the weaver has no technology, no method, no technique and no symmetry. This is a hereditary instinct as are the songs and the characteristic behaviour of other birds.

Hence, the best way to understand the woven construction will be to unweave the nest from the loop to the end of the tube. After fastening together the lower part of the loop, the fibres are coiled together by means of a strong fibre giving the appearance of a rope. The whole solid mass of the canopy is cleverly attached to the loop and the weaver proceeds weaving downwards, but as the weaver does not follow any set method or symmetry, it gives the appearance that the weaving is done at random. The only way to give strength and unity to their criss-cross weaving is through knots and joints. As it will be rather incoherent to describe with precision the manner in which the weaver knits its knots and joints, I have adopted the nomenclature used by the scouts when they learn the names of all sorts of knots and joints and the manner in which these are done. That forms the basic foundation for the training of the scouts. And, as there are some points of likeness and resemblance between the scout technique and the ways of the weaver, for all knots and joints have the same purpose or end to achieve: the reef

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\* Could this be 200 mm.? - Ed.

knot  with some modifications, simple whipping,  the clove hitch,  the bow line  with some modifications, the round turn  and two half hitches  with some modifications; (in making the round turn, the weaver always used short and thin fibres) the first step to the sheep shank  with some modifications.

Every fibre is first stuck into the woven mass by a simple peck and bend and woven until the end of the fibre is reached, and this very often is left loose.

I have not been able to find any reference to the time factor required by the weaver to build its nest. I can give here only personal observations on two different occasions. One nest was completed in ten days and the other in 11 days. When I had to abandon my observations due to lack of time, the builder had just started weaving the tube. I will not take the risk of asserting that the time factor mentioned above is the standard for a weaver to build its nest, until further observations have been made.

### Conclusions

The finish of the nests and the number of fibres used in each nest, will I think not always be the same; this will vary with the quality of the materials and on the initiative of the builder. I have always wondered how the weaver bird, with only its beak to go by, can produce such a masterpiece but after going through the process of unweaving the whole nest, I must say that I am still left wondering!

### ECOLOGICAL STUDY OF REST AND ROOST BEHAVIOUR OF THE PEAFOWL (PAVO CRISTATUS). Part 2

Indra Kumar Sharma

[Continued from p. 8 of Volume 12(6)]

Method of ascending and descending from roost site. The peafowl first flies to the lowest horizontal branch, then climbs to higher branches and reaches the topmost thin horizontal branch with a short flight. On a less suitable tree the peafowl was observed flying directly to roost site. Peafowl descends to the ground in the morning by reaching a corner branch and then flying down. Before descending it arranges plumes, scratches, and peeps around in all direction as some event around may concern it. After descending to the ground it directly moves to places where it usually gets food.

Descending timings. It was observed that descending from roost site starts 25 minutes before sunrise and lasts till 10 minutes past sunrise, optimum time is 20 to 10 minutes before sunrise. A few lazy ones descend late after sunrise.

Site of roosts. It roosts on high thin horizontal branch of a tree. This is a safe site, being inaccessible to carnivorous animals. Secondly, any movement of an enemy on the branch is transmitted to the peafowl which is then alerted to escape.

Ficus bengalensis, F. religiosa, Alianthus excelsa, Azadirachta indica, Tamarindus indica, Albizzia lebbek and Mangifera indica are the usual choice for roost site. Peepul (F. religiosa) was found choicest tree for the purpose as it fulfils required conditions as large tree with stout open branches and this tree is available as it is considered sacred tree hence people plant it in their locality. Baker narrates that even a 4 metre tree in a field serves as roost site of the peafowl. I observed that Azadirachta is much used for roost as it is easily available near human habitations. It was noted that the peafowl prefers to roost near human habitat than in more suitable sites away from human habitations - in jungle, because the peafowl faces less number of carnivora near human habitat and the people give protection to it. In the absence of usual roost tree it was observed roosting on trees as Prosopis spiciqera, P. juliflora, Salvadora sp. in the arid region. In the suburban area where no suitable tree is available for roost purpose it has been observed to do so on top of tombs or such lofty inaccessible sites.

Various factors effecting the roost site. It was observed that it uses roost place for years till there is serious disturbance by man or beast (generally cats) which compel it to select alternative sites. Some times another peacock, generally an intruder, is knocked out otherwise, the owner finds other alternative site near by. It was observed that defoliation of trees is unsuitable to the peafowl for safety reason as that looses concealing property; hence on defoliation the peafowl changes over to other trees till its regular tree again becomes covered with foliage.

Roost behaviour and activities. It was observed that peacocks do not roost close to each other and repel other peacocks which roost close by, i.e. radius of 2-3 metres. Peahens like to roost together so they do so on adjoining branches. In a habitat where population was high but suitable roost trees were few, 10-15 peafowl were found roosting on a large tree.

Activities during roosting. After climbing on the roost branch and arranging its plumes, the bird sits down when darkness prevails. It gives roost calls in the evening and morning (as early as 4 a.m.). During night it remains silent but at the danger of coming of a stranger or a bang of a gun shot or thunder, peafowl give alarm calls to alert other peafowls at the habitat.



Discussion and conclusion. My observations confirm that a large-bodied bird (peafowl) gets exhausted sooner than small and average sized bird. After a vigorous activity the peafowl requires prolonged rest for recovery and it finds suitable rest resort with difficulty as it needs a large suitable space which is scarce. So also the peafowl requires stout and open branches of a tree for a roost; it does not and cannot roost huddled together in groups as small birds do. Peafowl has learnt to roost near human locality to enjoy the facility of the food and protection given by man. An average-sized bird has a permanent roost tree, not a branch but a large-sized bird like peafowl has also a permanent branch of its own on a tree as most branches cannot suit it for roosting and some branches be occupied by other fellows.

Acknowledgement. I acknowledge my gratefulness to Dr Ishawar Prakash, Animal Ecologist, Central Arid Zone Research Institute, Jodhpur, for his guidance in my work. I am also grateful to local farmers who provided me the facility on their farms for my observations.

#### BLACKBACKED WOODPECKERS

J. S. Serrao

It is interesting how a pair of Blackbacked Woodpeckers (Chrysocolaptes festivus) defeated me after trying my patience for quite some time.

Exactly opposite Culvert No. 9, to the left of the road to the Borivli National Park via Aarey, stands a dead tad (Borassus flabellifer). Since September last year it was regularly being patronized by a pair of these woodpeckers. The stem has four oval-shaped woodpecker holes in apartment style. I expected the pair to breed in this tad but nothing happened.

On 4.vi.1972 I again saw either the same or a different pair working on this tad. The female was chipping off bits from the top edge of one of the holes; the male was searching the stem lower down. I seated myself on the culvert parapet (c. 15 ft from the tad) and watched them at work. All went well till the female spotted me. Once she became aware of my presence she at once circled round the stem and away from my side, quickly followed by the male. Thus hidden both started eyeing me suspiciously every now and then with outstretched necks. I waited motionless and pretended not to look in their direction, but no effort induced them to move over to my side of the stem. So I walked to the base of the tad and on to the side of the birds. But they crept round and away from me. I started moving round with them, but as I gained on them they kept on moving away faster. I expected that my persistence would



' This happened at Mt Abu, where I used to live for nine months in the year for over 8 years.

' I named my pet crow whom I call Abu Jack. He (she?) had 2 kids who were named: Cranky and Franky. Of these three, Cranky became so familiar with me that every afternoon, when I kept my bedroom door open, he would fly down from the branch of a tree close to my room (where he used to sit and watch me), enter my room, walk across fearlessly and pick up biscuit pieces from under my bed. Cranky took great care to see that there was no one else near my room, and that I was all alone.

' Crows are gregarious and methodical. In India we notice that wherever there are humans there are crows. On the Mt Abu household, where I was living (Sarupbhavan Palace) there were about 30 people living in the compound. At the feeding time I used to count the number of crows which assembled there. On majority of days, they were invariably 15, i.e. in the ratio of 2 : 1. This is as if crows have worked out that two humans waste enough food to maintain one member of their species. (Crows perhaps consider humans as Buddhiheen (devoid of intellect)).

' Crows hold meetings. It must be every birdwatchers' experience to have seen crow meetings. During these sessions they are all seen facing in the same direction, excepting one or two. During this session, suddenly they get excited, and fly high and sit again at the allotted seat. They seem to discuss their problems which perhaps arise from their association with the humans!

' Crows have one eye which serves three purposes: they see, hear and talk through it. '

Mr Jadeja mentions that crows have only one eye. This is a common misconception. Crows have two eyes like all well developed vertebrates. It is very characteristic of crows to tilt their heads to one side and peer at nearby objects with one eye. The crow quite often draws the nictitating membrane or third eyelid over its eye, thereby giving a momentary impression that it has become blind.

## CORRESPONDENCE

### ' Arrival of the Pitta in Bombay '

The editorial suggestion [Newsletter 12(6): 10, June 1972] that Mr B. A. Palkhiwala would have the luck to see the same Pitta in the same place next year is rather misleading. In this instance it is interesting to recall what Dr Salim Ali wrote of the bird in our area:

'... We really know very little beyond conjecture about local movements of the Pitta, and here is a problem which only the ringing method can help to solve. The House-Crows of the city and suburbs are usually the first to herald

the arrival of the bird by their relentless persecution of them. Many a refugee is picked up every year, disabled by the blackguards or caught in a room into which it has blundered to escape its pursuers' (J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc. Vol. 40: 161; Sept. 1938).

In the 34 years that follow the publication of the above, very little appears to have been added to our knowledge of these birds. No doubt there has been some ringing of the pit-tas in the Borivili area and elsewhere, but, as far as I am aware, evidence has not come forth to show that birds ringed in a particular area in one year return to the same area in the succeeding year. Even if they do, it would be incorrect to presume that the bird seen by Mr Palkhiwala will meet with identical circumstances in 1973 and will again land on the terrace of his neighbour's house as it did this year.

J. S. Serrao

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# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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VOL XII NO. 8 AUGUST 1972





NEWSLETTER FOR  
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August 1972

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BIRDS SEEN ON TWO TREKS IN WEST NEPAL

S. R. Shah

May 9-12, 1972 we (my wife, son and myself) saw four Bar-headed Geese feeding on the spongy soil of southern bank of Raradaha Lake (W. Nepal, 39°36'N., 82°E., altitude 9800 ft). We observed them (not continuously) but from 2 p.m. on the 9th to 8 a.m. on the 12th excluding 7.30 p.m. to 6 a.m.

Whenever approached, the leader invariably spotted us c. 50 yards away and the group flew away and landed far away into the water or on the farther end of this monopolized strip of spongy soil, about a furlong wide and a mile long. From the water they invariably returned within half an hour.

The Handbook of Birds of India and Pakistan by Dr Salim Ali and S. Dillon Ripley states: '... mostly gone by end March during which month thousands reported migrating northward over the lower reaches of Karnali river in Nepal.' This lake is on Khater Khola on upper reaches of the Karnali. It is surprising that there were only four on this lake, c. 2 miles wide and 4 miles long! The Handbook also mentions: 'Extremely wary and difficult to approach while in its winter quarters, but astonishingly tame and confiding in the breeding grounds.' Here it was midway between the two habits. Though said to be 'largely a crepuscular and nocturnal feeder', we found it feeding morning till evening on the spongy soil though cornfields were not far away.

Again though they are said to breed on the high plateau lakes c. 4300 metres, mainly during the end of May and June, the altitude at which we met them was 9800 ft in the second week of May. Judged from the distance between each other, they were possibly two pairs - sometimes a pair was c. 10 yards from the other pair. They were unmolested as fishing and shooting is strictly prohibited by the Order of the King, as well as by religion. There are hardly any visitors in the area, and though it is a paradise for anglers we saw no villager with fishing gear. The area to hide their eggs and nests appeared to be small in the absence of surrounding bogs. Could they be two stray pairs about to breed?

Dippers. At the end of May, between the villages of Khati and Dwali, we saw three pairs of Dippers near a bridge on the torrential boulder-strewn Pindar stream. They were not Kashmir Dippers. In the absence of illustrations in any book, I cannot make out their identity. Two of the pairs were of a different kind. In general owing to absence of good coloured illustrations in any book I had access to, I cannot recognize about 50 birds seen during the two treks.

The Crested Bunting. According to The Book of Indian Birds this bird is found throughout the lower Himalayas up to about 5000 ft. We saw one near Jumla in the High Himalayas at c. 7800 ft.

The Rufousbacked Shrike and Rufous Turtle Dove. Just as the density of the House Sparrow is the highest in Bombay and that of the House Crow comes next to it, the density of the Rufousbacked Shrike was the highest, followed by that of the Rufous Turtle Dove in this region of Rara Daha Lake. 9800-10,000 ft.

The Monal. When the bird flies from one ridge to another across the streams, it utters a sharp quick-repeated kik-kik-kik on the wings like a female koel.

Blackthroated Jay. On our way to Pindari, on all four occasions, we found this bird singly and not in pairs.

## BIRDS AROUND CALCUTTA AND THEIR VANISHING HABITATS

Ananta Mitra

With the rapid growth of population in the country, the principal city of West Bengal is expanding fast, and to our great misfortune at the cost of the marshes and the greens. We are floating on the wave of spontaneity. No plan exists for the conservation of nature. It is tragically true that the birds which are enlisted here may not be present in the area in the next season.

Nothing at present heard about the bird sanctuary proposed to be set up in the Salt Lake area near the City, although a survey team from the IUCN has given its due approval to the proposal.

To come in contact with a number of birds we must move out to a considerable distance. This we did on 1.iv.1972. We went southwards to Rath-tola, some 25 km from the centre of the City. Here, there is a patch of green about 30-35 acres in area, where some variety of beautiful birds are still maintaining their precarious existence. Of course, no one knows when this area will be denuded of the trees and shrubs to make room for apartments and factories.

On entering the area we sense the spring. Enchanting bird calls were coming from different directions. The Bluethroated Barbet, Blackheaded Oriole, Magpie Robin and the Brain Fever Bird were in songs. We found them one by one. Then there appeared the Plaintive Cuckoo. Initially the small Peep was there, then the peep-peep, and finally the whole song began to burst forth - Pee - pee - pee - pipipipipi ... It was calling melodiously from a small mango tree not very far from where we were. On further approach we listed: the Indian Tree Pie, Whitebreasted Kingfisher, Iora and the Ashy Wren-Warbler. In a mango grove there was a pair of Bronze Drongo feeding a chick which had just come out of the nest but could hardly fly. Our appearance was strongly resented by the pair who made all attempts to scare us away. It was an interesting sight. The drongos at first tried to charge us with the scissors-like calls; then they tried to intimidate us by mimicing the calls of the Tree Pie and the Crested Serpent Eagle. Failing in all their attempts, they ultimately persuaded the little one to somehow flapper away in the depth of the vegetation. There were Coppersmiths with their tonk tonk calls; a lone Orange-breasted Flycatcher was also about. A shikra was ominously circling overhead alternating its flight with sharp bends and glides.

Further ahead we came across the Common Wood Shrike, Black-naped Blue Flycatcher and the Coucal with its forceful calls. Tailor Birds were there in plenty. In a small pond we found a Common Kingfisher, making a sharp dive from its perch and getting hold of a fry about half its own length. The living thing was swallowed with the head first. An Emerald Dove crossed the pond over to the other side and started its low booming calls - Hum hum ... hummm hummm ... Other birds that were come across were the Grey Wagtail, Green Willow Warbler, Spotted Dove, Pied Kingfisher, Lineated Barbet, Koel, Goldenbacked Woodpecker, Pied Myna, Redvented Bulbul, Pariah Kite, Pond Heron, Common Myna, House Crow and Jungle Crow. Our tally was 34 species in about two hours' watching. With about 47 other species of birds seen in the area on earlier occasions, the



the total number of bird species existing in this area at one time or another is 81.

Under the new amendment in the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act, gardens and orchards are proposed to be taken over by the State. Bird lovers and naturalists of the present and future generation will remain ever grateful if this particular habitat is taken over by the Government and turned into a small natural bird park. If this is done an area of green will be conserved to mollify the severity of the climate and much harassed birds driven from place to place will find a shelter.

### USHERS OF MONSOON

G. De

As the arrival of SW. monsoon this year was becoming late and official weather-forecasters were losing their face (Laxman's cartoon depicted about betting in the meteorological department) I was wondering whether birds could be of any help. On the 10th June I took a round in the Vihar Lake area but in vain. On the 18th June at noon I heard the call of the Pied Crested Cuckoo for a few seconds in the Indian Institute of Technology campus. In the early hours of the 19th Bombay received the first bout of shower. Whether one calls it a pre-monsoon or monsoon (which became doubtless by the next 24 hours) such a close running on one another's heels in any case reduces the value of the Pied Crested Cuckoo as a forecaster of monsoon. However, the joy of seeing the first bird of the season is none the less, which I had on the 20th at noon in the campus.

III campus is also enjoying the benefit of the visit of a pair of Plaintive Cuckoo since the middle May - 'pair' because I have seen once two of them near each other but with no clue so far to their mutual relation and 'visit' because the sign of their existence was betrayed by their calls only from that time.

Unusual visitors to the campus this year had been Pheasant-tailed Jacanas. Towards the end of May one day the morning air was reverberating with the nasal, coarse and loud meeow, meeow, somewhat reminiscent of the calls of the peafowl. After half an hour or so a black and white pie-like bird emerged from a portion of the lily pond, which is screened off from our balcony by a few shrubs. The bird flew away in one direction. But after an hour it called again from the lily pond area. In the afternoon it was heard again and it flew away finally in another direction being aware of my curiosity. After 10 days or so, again the morning air was filled with similar calls. There were three of them in bright plumage. After an hour's stay in the lily pond they flew away, perhaps concluding that it cannot offer them enough privacy.



I may also mention that a mongo-grove in the IIT campus receives regular year visit (4 years' observation) of an Indian Pitta. This year it was noticed between 16.v.1972 and 3.vi.72.

#### UNEXPECTED SUMMER VISITORS IN THE HIMALAYAS - REDWATTLED LAPWING

Sohan Singh Saini

It was the month of August 1970 that I happened to visit a very remote area forming the head of a stream called the Sarvary which merges with the Beas river at Kulu. This entire walk of c. 18 miles was along this stream and had to be done on foot which is advantageous from a birdwatcher's point of view. I was lucky enough to meet two chuckor partridges on my way. **Other birds met on the way were:** Black Partridge, Parakeets, Laughing Thrushes, Scarlet Minivets and Kashmir Dipper.

The next morning I started early on my work of forest inspection. At c. 10.30 a.m. I reached a grassy blank grazing ground, at c. 8500 ft elevation. This is a very picturesque spot with northern aspect exposed fully to the sun and around the grassy land there are magnificent silver fir, spruce and cherry trees giving a look of silent monks, standing in a state of meditation. Here, while lost myself in the beauty of nature, I was stunned to hear Did-you-do-it? call of the Lapwing. I did not believe my ears and immediately stopped there. And very soon the bird landed a little too far away to be observed. So I walked cautiously, and when the bird came to clear view, stopped further advance, and sat down on a log. It was then that I could, to the best of my knowledge, confirm the identity of the bird.

I had to sit for about half an hour when the second member also came out of the small grass and the pair was staring at me and my party as we were at them. It was very cold and I could sit no more in that confinement. So, slowly, with all cooperation for the birds I approached them and the birds were kind enough to allow me within 15 ft of them. It was sunny there and I observed these two birds again to make myself sure of the identity. Then along with my men I walked casually towards the birds and with my approach too near, both of them flew away with a Tee-ee-ee and settled about 300 yards ahead in the open, providing a more clear view. In the evening on my way back I again met with these birds.

Inquiries with the locals revealed that these two birds are seen almost every year; no other birds of this species have ever been seen in the area, or in the other areas of the district. They are said to be seen only during the summer, but the exact period was not pinpointed.

During the last 4 years in this area I had no other occa-

sion of seeing this bird. I have tried but failed to assign any reason for this peculiar visit of these birds to such a heavenly abode. I shall be obliged if some learned readers throw some light on the subject.

## THE GULLS AT HOME

Zafar Futehally

In the second half of June I was in the Isle of Skye, Scotland, a spectacularly beautiful place consisting of mountains and inland seas and a favourite breeding area of gulls.

Around our house the land was full of rabbit burrows and every time we went out for a walk the hound belonging to our hosts brought home a rabbit for supper. Some distance away, the land ended up abruptly in steep rocky ledges bordered by the sea and this area was a favourite nesting site of the Herring Gulls. There were several nests with one or two eggs and chicks in various stages of growth. When we approached the nests the parents screamed their heads off but surprisingly none of the birds ever attacked us. But the young ones took the hint from the attitude and calls of their parents and froze obliteratedly in the crevices of the rocks. Their spotted protective coloration was a most effective camouflage. Fish bones were visible everywhere.

The Herring Gulls in their breeding plumage of grey and white are most attractive to look at but I was more taken up by a group of Oystercatchers that were obviously nesting in the locality. Their red bills and legs and striking black and white plumage makes it easy to spot them and they also assist the birdwatcher by calling agitatedly as so many birds do instead of remaining silent. The only place in India where I have seen Oystercatchers is in Kihim in the Kolaba district and near the Diu Island in Gujarat. The bird at Kihim had a broken leg but was working gallantly up and down the beach. The bird in Gujarat was pointed out by Dharmakumarsinhji as we were driving along in the Jeep.

To revert to the gulls, we saw large numbers of the Lesser Blackbacked species around Stockholm. Sven Nillson and Sylvia (whom many of our Bombay members will remember) took us for a delightful cruise and our ship was followed all the way by the Lesser Blackbacked and Herring gulls which were sucked along effortlessly in the wake of the air currents created by the moving vessel, from Stockholm to Arlanda. We also passed several islands where gulls and duck were nesting.

The Nillsons stay in Djursholm in a suburb of Stockholm. They are surrounded by a birch forest more beautiful than any I have seen. Song Thrushes, Blackbirds, and Tits kept the place alive with their songs. Just half a mile away there is a small lake where Coots and Blackheaded Gulls were nesting. The gulls here

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were much more aggressive and after a while I slunk away though I would have liked to get a closer view of the nest. I saw a mother (or father ?) Coot with its brood being viciously attacked by a Blackbacked Gull. Every time the gull dived at the Coot, the latter opened its beak wide and looked fairly formidable in that pose.

In London we spent two days with Stewart Melliush, who was such a pillar of our Newsletter when he was in India. He stays near Richmond Park and walks the dog in the Park every morning.

An attempt to contact D. A. Stairmand over the telephone from London did not succeed. Stairmand has migrated to Devon which is a good birdwatching country and has promised to continue sending in his notes.

In Oxford we spent a delightful week end with Richard and Maisie Fitter of the Fauna Preservation Society. Their house 'Drifts' combines all the qualities which an ideal human habitat should possess. Space, beauty, a spectacular view, birds in the garden, and badgers in the adjoining forest which they own. A Woodcock flew back and forth across the garden at the appointed time and its movements were fairly predictable.

#### OBITUARY NOTICE: R. H. Brown

We were very grieved to hear about the death of Mr R. H. Brown, a member of our Club.

He was a keen observer and attended our meetings regularly. May his soul rest in peace.

#### NOTES AND COMMENTS

##### Monsoon indicators

G. De's note at page 4 on the relationship between the SW. monsoon and the arrival of the Pied Crested Cuckoo brings to mind the many statements made to prove or disprove that the bird is the harbinger of the monsoon. Apart from birds, plants too act as indicators, and J. S. Serrao (Newsletter Vol. 10, August 1970) had referred to the Wild Banana. The rustics look upon the Wild Banana (Musa grandis) as an unfailing jungle barometer of the SW. monsoon. According to them the plant starts to grow with the actual arrival of the SW. monsoon, and no amount of premonsoon rains stimulate it to shoot up (Ryan, J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc. 15: 586).

Serrao reports that this year on his visit to the Borivli National Park on 18.vi.1972 he found that the Wild Banana had shot up all over, and its leaves had grown to about 3 ft in length. This was surprising in view of the fact that there

were no rains at all and the weather chart showed a rain deficit of 193 mm on that date. Inquiries with a local Forest Guard at the Park showed that this was the first instance in his experience when the Wild Banana had sprouted in the latter half of May much before the regular commencement of the rains. The other monsoon plant Karvi (Karvia callosa) behaved according to the usual pattern and started to grow after the rains had commenced on the 19th June.

## CORRESPONDENCE

### The Crow

Regarding crows, the following may be of interest. My medical doctor friend, M.H. Weinberg, who lived in Wodehouse Road was much intrigued by crows, which he found to be clever and intelligent. He befriended one of them, which would take food from his hand when he held it behind his back. However, with time the crow became bolder and would steal, with the result that it was driven away in disgrace. Thereafter Dr Weinberg used his .202 rifle against crows.

A. M. Tyabji

61-D, Bhulabhai Desai Road

Bombay 26

### Befriending the crow and other birds.

Under Notes and Comments in the July Newsletter have appeared interesting observations Mr Sursinhji S. Jadeja made on the Common House Crow. This bird gives us excellent opportunity of exploring its world, but is ignored perhaps owing to over-much familiarity that we have with it.

Mr Jadeja is again right in making freindship with crows because this is one of the best ways by which one can understand any animal intimately and accurately, and the crow is the right bird for such a study.

I recall here some feeble attempts I made to befriend a Rufousbacked Shrike by giving it food at a particular place at a particular time always preceded by a whistling sound. The food was cockroach dropped from an upper storey of my apartment. The birds ability to locate the dead insect in the midst of the rubble was found to be extremely poor. It is the motion that catches its eye and is neither the color nor the shape of the food. As days passed, I relaxed the time restriction, and with the intimacy I gained, I wanted to knock out each restriction one by one, except my whistling. But for some reason I could not proceed with the experiment.

To the question whether crows hate or fear humans, my reply

is that they certainly fear us and if they hate us, so they do because they fear humans.

To me it appears that crows do not hold meetings but they do play games. What is taken to be a meeting is just a game in full swing!

Regarding the statement that 'crows have one eye' I do not think that Mr Jadeja has seen only one eye being used while the other closed by the nictitating membrane. Perhaps what he means and what I have always seen is that birds in general do not make use of both their eyes at a time in looking at an object; it alternates by tilting the head this way and that. That little tilting is required to a distant object is obvious. This is got of course not by closing one eye and opening the other, but using one and not using the other. Watch a one eyed bird and the truth of my observation will be clear. This is the basic reason for such visual arrangement in birds. However in the owl the case is different because its eyes are placed frontally. Owls are carnivorous birds and badly need binocular vision to locate their prey, and they can perceive an object with both the eyes at a time.

P. V. Jose  
New Siddharthnagar, Goregaon  
West, Bombay 62

### Breeding Purplerumped Sunbirds

Birdwatchers to the Borivli National Park may get a chance of seeing a pair of Purplerumped Sunbirds (Nectarinia zeylanica) feeding nest-young in the early part of August. The nest-tree, an Acacia catechu, stands at the southern extremity of Culvert No. 14 and slants north over the Culvert wall. It is to the right of the road as one proceeds into the National Park via Aarey. The nest is well camouflaged in a bunch of dried up pods of the tree and is difficult to spot unless carefully looked for. The agitation of the pair, particularly of the male at the sight of intruders is what attracts ones attention to the tree.

When the nest was first come across on 16.vii.1972 it was being lined. The female alone was seen carrying cottony material to the nest. She was accompanied by the male on her to and fro flights. At the sight of intruders she never took the material to the nest, but dropped it from her beak, and joined the male in his agitated swearings.

J. S. Serrao

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# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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VOL XII NO. 9 SEPTEMBER 1972



NEWSLETTER FOR  
BIRDPATCHERS

Volume 12, Number 9

September 1972

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ON REVISITING DELHI

Horace Alexander

My wife and I spent four weeks in India in November and December, 1971. About half of that time was spent in Delhi, so whenever there was a chance to revisit old haunts where I used to enjoy the birds, I seized it with alacrity. It is over fifteen years since I lived in Delhi, so I was naturally curious to see if there were any obvious changes in the status of some of our Delhi birds.

First, though, I have to speak with sorrow of the differences in Delhi ornithologists. We already knew that we should not be able to go birding with Mrs Ganguli. What wonderful outings we had with her in years gone by. When we arrived we learnt that General Williams had just died too. Another grievous blow. What about Peter Jackson? No, he had finally left Delhi more than a year ago. So the Delhi Birdwatchers are sadly stripped of some of the most active members.

But what about the birds? On our very first day, I met with a surprise. We visited the Gandhi Memorial at Rajghat. On the ground close to the stone slab a pair of Pied Mynas were walking.

about. Now, in the days when I explored all around Delhi, the Pied Myna was a rarity. I recall some at the Dasna jheel, well to the east of Delhi; but scarcely anywhere else. The Rajghat pair was not the only pair we saw. We took several morning walks in the Lodi Gardens, and saw at least one pair there. One day we walked along the canals to the north of Old Delhi, and found Pied Mynas there. Indeed, I rarely went birding without seeing them. We drove all the way to Dehra Dun and back, and I noticed Pied Mynas several times, including a pair (they nearly always are in pairs, I think) quite high up above the Siwaliks, on the outskirts of the town of Dehra Dun. When we drove to Agra and Bharatpur, I saw them again at various places. It seems like a big increase. Has the species moved northwest over a broad range of country? Does anyone know?

I see that the Pied Myna was species 107 in Peter Jackson's list of 146 species seen round Delhi in twenty-four hours in March 1970, which rather suggests that the increase is very recent. However, the 1967 edition of the Delhi bird list gives it as 'fairly common'. In my day it was assuredly NTC - not at all common'. Has my memory betrayed me? I think not.

Next I must record my belief that the House Sparrow has increased greatly. This, I suppose, is the natural result of the increase in the size of the city. But they seem to have taken over in places where they were not so common formerly, such as the walls of several Delhi's ancient monuments. At Humayun's tomb, and several other places, where I was hoping to renew acquaintance with that delightful species, the Brown Rock Chat, every bird that should have been a Rock Chat was 'only a Sparrow'. If the House Sparrow has driven out the Brown Rock Chat, that is a matter for regret. Even at Mehrauli, which I recall as a very good place for odd birds - the old bunting or unusual wintering warbler or what not - there seemed to be nothing but sparrows. I did not like that!

What other changes did I notice? The Zoo was only at its early stages when I lived in Delhi. It was amazing to find a large and noisy colony of Painted Storks so near to the city. How long have they been there, I wonder? And the pools in the Zoo ground were alive with waterfowl, mostly Shovellers.

I began at the Gandhi Memorial; so let me end with a visit to the Nehru Memorial, a mile away in the same river flats. Here, the birds were so enthralling that I could hardly pay attention to the memorial stone. I thought that would have pleased Jawaharlal. For him, I think the living world was always much more interesting than the dead. It was late afternoon, and wagtails were coming in to roost in the well-watered grass all around. Several of these, of the Blackheaded race, Motacilla flava melanogrisea I suppose, were in full plumage, even in November, dazzlingly black and yellow. There were also

some beautiful White Wagtails, whose race I attempted to identify. And all the time birds of various species were passing over to their roosting places.

The only flycatcher I saw while we were in Delhi was a White-browed Fantail in the Lodi Gardens: no Redbreasted and no Grey-headed; but this may have been just a chance. Hoopoes seem to be as common as ever. And as long as that is so, I should say that a walk round Delhi can never be a disappointment.

## A VISIT TO THE GHANA

D. A. Stairmand

While travelling from Delhi to Agra I stayed at the Rest House, Keoladeo Ghana, Bharatpur on 21-22.vii.1971.

The monsoon rains had been slight up to that time and only a few birds had started nesting activities with the large body of nesting waterbirds yet to arrive.

I believe the Ghana extends over 12 square miles of which 7 are inundated. The Ghana is not just birds as I saw and watched Blackbuck, Cheetal, Sambar, Nilgai, Wild Pig, Hare, Tortoise, Mongoose and Otters; Snakes, etc. may be seen.

There are bunds to walk along and roads to drive on. I preferred walking and I hope most readers are similarly inclined. From these bunds and roads I saw a large variety of birds. Sarus Cranes and Painted Storks were common and other storks were Lesser Adjutant, Whitenecked, Blacknecked and Openbills. There were Grey- and Purple Herons, Large-, Smaller- and Little egrets, Darters, Cormorants, Spoonbills, White Ibis, Cattle Egrets, Pond Herons all in fair numbers. Other water or waterside birds included Stilts, Whitebreasted Waterhens, the very beautiful Pheasant-tailed- and Bronzewinged Jananans, Pied, Common-, and Whitebreasted Kingfishers, Purple Moorhens and Redwattled Lapwings. I heard and watched a male Watercock calling from a swampy verdent green area and in this same area I once had a female Blacknecked Stork (with lemon-yellow iris), a Painted Stork and a Purple Moorhen in my binoculars at the same time. A most colourful sight.

Mynas were well represented by the Pied-, Brahminy, Common-, and Bank all in good numbers. There were Peafowl, several coveys of Grey Partridge, Hoopoes, Rufousbacked Shrikes (the last two were very welcome as they are absent from Bombay during the monsoon), lovely Little Brown- and Ring doves in courtship display, Goldenbacked Woodpeckers, Jungle- and Common babblers, Bayas nesting, Whitecheeked and Redvented bulbuls, Purple Sunbirds, Black Drongos, Roseringed Parakeets, Common Green- and Bluecheeked Bee-eaters while cuckoos were represented by Common Hawk, the elegant Pied Crested, Koels and Coucals.

Around the Rest House were many birds and several animals.



Mr Pandey - who manages the Ghana with admirable kindness, knowledge, hard work and enthusiasm - utterly dedicated, in fact - puts food on a mound near the Rest House and partridges are frequently to be seen taking advantage of this free feed. Towards dusk several young wild pig were feeding on the mound when a stag Cheetal advanced on them. In this instance the wild pig retreated without a fight but Mr Pandey informed me that there could well have been a scrap over the scraps if a large boar had been around.

After dusk a party of Spotted Owlets delighted me all evening and through the night while feeding and preening near the Rest House.

Many domestic cattle are allowed to graze in the Ghana for a very nominal sum. There are far too many of them but I gather nothing can be done to reduce the numbers let alone have all cattle removed from this nature sanctuary as they (idealistically) should be. Mr Pandey told me that the people supposedly looking after their cattle often do not keep the cattle to their allotted areas thereby causing even greater nuisance than officially permitted. Mr Pandey stated - and I fully agreed - that leopards should be introduced into the Ghana. This move would suit a double purpose as it would not only keep the deer and antelope population in natural check but would act as a deterrent to carelessness regarding cattle grazing.

I enjoyed my visit immensely and must express very much gratitude to Mr Pandey for the way he runs the place so efficiently and happily.

I would add - to make it perfectly clear - that I did not visit the Ghana at the 'best' time but even so thought it fantastic. There is a 'check list' of birds and up to October, 1970 different species recorded there numbered 279.

#### STORKS AND IBISES SEEN ON A DRIVE FROM DHARWAR TO HIREKERUR (MYSORE STATE)

S. G. Neginhal

September 22, 1971. Again the same 70 mile drive from Dharwar to Hirekerur (Mysore State) from 40 inches rainfall tract to 20 inches rainfall tract - but today the environment is changed. The previous two days it had rained heavily. The parched and desiccated ponds and tanks were suddenly filled up, though partly. The nullahs and jheels were once again flowing in these arid areas. The low-lying fields and wastelands were temporarily water-logged.

Near Kagi nelli, where the noted Kanada Poet Kanakdas spent his last days, I suddenly noticed five big Whitenecked Storks (Ciconia episcopus) moving on their long, red legs on the skirt-

ing of a pond. The white collar, the long black beak, white vent are quite diagnostic. I stopped and went near them. They flew away to a nearby tree. Their white vents are conspicuous during their flight. I had seen these storks last time in a desiccated pond near Nigadi (Dharwar) on 12.v.1971, which is a 40 inch rainfall tract. It was interesting to see them there moving with some cattle egrets, following some buffaloes.

I had no time to follow up these storks. After covering c. 7 miles I came across a tank. In its shallow waters I saw two Grey Herons (Ardea cinerea) slowly moving.

Going another 5 miles I can across a still bigger tank near Hansbhavi. Sometimes spate of luck awaits a birdwatcher when least expected. From the moving jeep some big and beautiful birds were seen sauntering about on the foreshore of the tank. I stopped and walked towards the tank. These were the Painted Storks (Ibis leucocephalus) standing about 3 ft high, with long, thick, bright yellow bills and yellow faces. Except for the black coloured wings, the rest of the body is white. The legs are long and reddish. Some were standing hunched up. There were six. These birds were not alone. Quite close by, the White Ibises (Threskiornis melanocephala), with their neck, head and curved bill coloured black, contrasting against their snow-white body and the Black Ibises (Pseudibis papilosa) with their black body, long curved bill, and crimson-warted top head, were actively probing with their bills into the soft soil. The White Ibises were four and the Black were sixteen. Some chestnut and brown coloured ducks were also there, which I could not identify. The Painted Storks appear to be very suspicious and shy. They were the first to be alarmed by human presence. They hastily retreated and flew, circling overhead. A white 'V' patch is characteristically seen on the black wings of the flying Painted Storks. These were followed in their flight by the ibises. Two white patches on the shoulders of the flying Black Ibises are prominently seen, which were concealed when the birds were moving on the ground.

The return journey in the late afternoon was rewarded by a pair of Malabar Pied Hornbills (Anthracoceros coronatus), perching shoulder to shoulder on top of a roadside neem tree, nearer Dharwar. The horn-shaped bright yellow bill topped by a casque were quite impressive. As I got down the jeep and went nearer the neem tree, they flew off with sudden and rapid loud flaps. A lone Common Grey Hornbill (Tockus birostris) just then came and occupied the vacant space.

## THE BIRDS OF MAHARASHTRA

Zafar Futehally

In the Notes and Comments of Vol. 12, No. 3 of the Newsletter the Editor promised that he would write a note on the birds which he saw during his visit to the forested areas of Maharashtra in February, and this article is a result of this commitment. It is obviously impossible and quite unnecessary to refer to all the birds seen during this trip and I only propose to comment on a few which particularly impressed me.

On the 3rd of February I drove from Poona with Shri U. R. Mavinkurve, the Conservator of Forests through Ambegaon, and we spent the night in the beautiful rest house in the compound of which is the monument to the memory of Alexander Gibson, the Chief Conservator of Forests of Maharashtra. When we had washed away the dust and were reclining comfortably on the veranda after sunset, the loud pik-wik, pik-wik calls of the Stone Plover were exciting to hear. I do not recall having heard this bird for the past 7 or 8 years, the last occasion being in Jinjunwada in Saurashtra. Almost simultaneously the Common Indian Nightjar started its fascinating 'stone-on-ice' calls. A few Spotted Owlets joined in from time to time.

In the morning I saw a Pale Harrier racing across the grasslands and a hundred larks flew up in alarm. A little later a vast number of Blackbellied Finch-Larks came into view and kept on displaying their daring aerobatics, hurtling themselves from a great height and checking their flight almost as they touched the ground. The entire landscape around this famous monument is extremely picturesque and it is a great pity that much of this area will be drowned by the Kukdi Project.

On the morning of the 4th February we were at Shivneri Fort, and like most forts in Maharashtra, it commands a magnificent view. I watched a pair of Kestrels for a long time and very luckily my binoculars were trained on the pair when they dived down for many hundred yards in a deep valley. In the same area there was a Blackwinged Kite whose slow and laboured movements were in great contrast to the lightning manoeuvres of the kestrels but which nevertheless are most appealing. We saw the bird parachuting down to the ground obviously aiming at a prey but the effort was unsuccessful.

While walking down from the Fort I saw a Blue Rock Thrush on the branch of a Maharukh (Ailanthus excelsa) in confrontation with a pair of Redvented Bulbuls. I do not know why the bulbuls look upon the thrush with disfavour. Perhaps they do not want a migrant to remain in their cosy surroundings.

On the 6th February we were in Bhimashanker. It was an extremely cold day, and a marvellous one for birdwatching. The forest echoed with the calls of many species -- Blyth's Reed



Warbler tsch-tsched away. Small Green Barbets and Large Green Barbets kutroo-kutrooed in almost similar fashion. Rufous-backed Shrikes displayed wonted bad temper scolding everyone in sight. The bubbling chorus of Scimitar Babblers exploded from the forest floor. There was a deep moaning call from some bird which I entered in my notebook as chaar chapati, chaar chapati; perhaps it was the Nilgiri Wood Pigeon (Columba elphinstoni). Several Grey Junglefowl flew away at my approach on whirring wings.

From the highest point in Bhimashanker I had a fine view of an eagle which was stationary in the breeze as it faced the wind. From its general appearance and the fact that it was silvery white from below I thought it could be a Short-toed Eagle. Its black throat was very evident, but though Mountfort refers to this (the black throat) in his book A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe I see no reference to it in Salim Ali.

When I came back to the beautiful Forest Rest House late in the evening, I found a kestrel flying around and finally settle for the night on the beam of the garage. Like all falcon, kestrels have a large head, broad shoulders and long pointed wings. Once it had tucked in for the night I could approach the bird to within six feet and the torchlight did not seem to disturb it at all.

On the 7th we started for Koyna from Poona via Satara and Patan. I must have seen at least two dozen kestrels on the way, many of them hovering and quite often three or four birds together. At one place where there were a large number of ancient banyan trees along the roadside a dozen grey hornbills came into view. They were Tockus griseus without the casque on the bill. They were having a wonderful time on the ripening figs of the banyan.

In the evening after reaching Koyna, we went up the Chiplun Ghat. What a pleasure it is to see stretches of virgin forest which are completely preserved because of lack of roads. But our burgeoning population will soon bring these forests too to their knees unless a much more vigorous protection policy is enforced. In this area I again saw an eagle which seemed to be similar to the one seen in Bhimashanker a few days before. I could see the black throat patch on the white underside quite clearly.

(To be continued)



## A HOUSE CROW ANTING

T. V. Jose

Early in the morning at about 7.30 on 11 April 1972 in our garden I saw a common house crow (Corvus splendens) sitting on a branch of a cashew tree busily engaged in preening. As I saw it pecking at something each time, I moved towards it to know what it pecked at. I saw it pick up a red ant (Oecophylla smaragdina) in its beak and briskly rub it against its primary feathers. The process continued for about a minute.

This is the second time I saw a bird anting; the first was a Magpie Robin (Copsychus saularis) on our house roof, but I was not sure which ant the bird used.

Anting is widely and regularly practised by many species of birds. Among those recorded using Red Ants (Oecophylla smaragdina) were Jerdon's Chloropsis, Common Myna, Song Thrush and the Drongo. In most cases it is found the bird eats the crushed ant after rubbing it into its feathers. The purpose of anting may be to rid the bird of the ectoparasites. Formic acid was first distilled from red ants (Formica rufa) as early as 1670 and is known to be a powerful antiseptic. Hence ants rubbed into the feathers would effectively rid the bird of such noxious parasites; when swallowed after rubbing may have the effect of ejecting the endoparasites with which birds are commonly affected.

In addition formic acid also contains a small amount of formaldehyde and may be acted upon by the gastric secretions of the bird and converted into glucose, a very essential food material. -- Ed./

## REVIEW

The Colorado Field Ornithologist

We have received two issues of The Colorado Field Ornithologist in exchange for the Newsletter. On the last page of issue No. 10 (Nov. 1971) it says that the CFO is 'a semi-annual journal devoted to the field study of birds in Colorado. Articles and notes of scientific or general interest, and reports of unusual observations are solicited ... Membership and subscription fees: Full Member \$3.00; Library Subscription fees \$1.50'. In aim and scope the CFO seems to be more or less like our own Newsletter.

But one is struck by the differences as soon as one picks up issue No. 10 of the CFO: it contains 47 pages - 47 sheets, in fact, since only one side is used. And what sheets! They are as thick as card and smoother than some art paper we find in our best bird books. The result is that this issue

weighs as much as an ordinary book of 200-300 pages. It is indeed a pleasure to handle such a journal with its large format, luxurious feel, excellent printing and beautifully printed thick cover. Each cover is adorned by the photograph of a bird - the subject of one of the articles within. 'Sumptuous' is the word for it; 'sumptuous', I am afraid, is not equally apt!

CFO No. 10 (November 1971) contained ten contributions which should have greatly interested the journal's regular readers in Colorado. The most important of these is the one dealing with the breeding biology and behaviour of Mourning Doves, by Ralph J. Gutierrez. Seven pages long, it is a 'scientific paper', complete with section and paragraph headings thus: 1. Introduction. i. Scope & Purpose of the Study; ii. Acknowledgements. (2) Methods. i. Study area; ii. Observation periods. (3) Materials and Procedure. A. Mating. i. Preliminary stage; ii. Pair-formation; iii. Copulation. B. Nesting. i. Nest-site selection; ii. Introductory phase; iii. Nest construction; iv. Intra-actions; v. Interactions. C. Eggs and egg laying. i. Description; ii. Time eggs laid (sic). D. Incubation. (4) Summary. (5) Literature cited.

This reviewer felt that our own Newsletter could do with an occasional paper of this kind. If reports published in the Newsletter are to be taken seriously by compilers of books etc., the Newsletter will have to show that it is an 'adult' publication, quite capable of carrying some heavy stuff too.

No. 10 CFO contains also shorter and less formal reports of work at the nests of a Goshawk and an American Coot, and an interesting account of the aggressive behaviour of a wild male Blue Grouse which charged and chased a lady who was trying to feed it, and even attempted to enter the car in which the lady had sought shelter. This bird 'had an obvious limp when it walked'; deformity leading to delinquency?

A regular feature of the CFO is the recording of 'unusual observations' compiled by Mr David W. Lupton, the Editor. These records suggest that the term is very narrowly interpreted to mean 'records of rare birds seen'. In the two issues before me the section does not contain any note on unusual behaviour. No. 10 carries a complete list, with full addresses of all the members. The number in 1971 seems to have been 104. Do we have 104 Indians as regular subscribers to the Newsletter?\* Couldn't we print the full list of subscribers with their current addresses once a year, say in the December issue?

A problem that must be causing the Editor of our Newsletter endless anxiety is that of getting enough material for each

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\* Our paid-up membership is in the neighbourhood of 25 individuals. A list of members with their addresses is available with us and may be sent to those that desire to have it.

month's issue. He can certainly derive some comfort from the fact that though No. 10 of the CFO was nearly 50 pages long and contained many interesting contributions, No. 11 (March 1972) is emaciated and attenuated, with only 20 pages and just two contributed articles. (In between the publication of these two issues the CFO had changed from a semi-annual to a quarterly, with an increase of \$2.00 in membership fees.) Of the 2 contributed pieces the first is again a formal 'paper' on the nesting of the Mississippi Kite in Colorado - the sort of article that the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society prints as a major contribution. It is beautifully and meaningfully illustrated with a page of sketches of the Mississippi Kite in flight, showing the differences between the adult male, the fledgeling and the immature bird; also a sketch of a kite feeding on the wing, which could pass for one of the Pariah Kite or the Brahminy Kite feeding in flight. The second of the two articles is very like the contributions of the late Mrs Usha Ganguli, Shri Lavkumar and Mr Stairmand to our Newsletter: informal, epistolatory, and yet informative as well as entertaining.

Considering that our Newsletter is a monthly publication and costs only Rs10/- per annum, I don't think we need fear comparison with a publication like the CFO, especially if, at least once in six months, we could include a 'scientific paper' - or, better still (as many of us aren't even 'quasi-scientists') a long article on some outstanding field trip or of some important breeding place or sanctuary (such as the articles Mr Stewart Melluish contributed to Vols. 8 and 9 of the Newsletter).

A few snippets from the CFO which may be of interest to our readers:

1. A tiny owl (Otus flameolus) which Mr Richard W. Stransky nursed back to health 'would eat only insects. I tried heart and liver hidden in a grasshopper body. He could detect a piece of meat hidden inside a body plugged with grasshopper eggs. After eating the eggs, pulling out and discarding the meat, he would then eat the empty body' (No. 10, p. 18).

That the typist's or printer's devil is as much at home in Colorado as in Juhu Lane - though much less conspicuous - is evidenced by such a line as: 'If it were not for the help of the twenty some volunteers....' (No. 10, p. 18).\*

2. 'On July 17, 1971, members of the Denver Field Ornithologists (the printer's devil again?) gathered on North Rock Creek Road..to dedicate the meadows and forests along both sides of North Rock Creek..as a special Bird Nesting Area in honor of Dr and Mrs Alfred M. Bailey, longtime Director of the Denver Museum of Natural History (1936-69) and internationally



known ornithologist. At noon, a newly erected sign was unveiled in the presence of Dr and Mrs Bailey after which Dr Bailey spoke of his experiences and thoughts about ornithology. This was followed by punch and cookies furnished by Mrs William Echelmeyer and later by a picnic lunch in the meadow area ' (No. 10, p. 21).

3. Extract from a letter to the Editor from Mr Van Remsen: We ' strongly believe that the CFO should be responsible for establishing an official state list.. I have recently sent.. my outline of a proposal for an official records committee and a standardized sight observation sheet... Basically five members of the panel independently rate a sight record on a scale of A, B, C, D, and F (quality of each rating defined), A and B being acceptable as state records.. What stimulated the outline was the vast range in quality of the details of sight observations in the latest CFO bulletin ' (No. 10, p. 2).

4. ' Many aspects of the breeding biology of the Mourning Dove have been studied extensively... Almost every state has contributed to the " explosion " of Mourning Dove literature ... More data are needed for interpretation of the many displays used by this species. ' Ralph J. Gutierrez No. 10, pp. 10-15. .. which reminds us once again that in literature it is not volume or mass that counts!

K. K. Neelakantan

#### NOTES AND COMMENTS

The combined report from Station Biologique, Camargue in France of which Mr Luc Hoffmann is the Director has just come in. Most of the report is in French but at the end there are English summaries, and the section dealing with the influence of the predation of birds of prey on the population of prey species and vice versa contains most interesting facts.

There has been always an argument about whether the predator keeps down prey numbers or whether it is the prey numbers which determine the population of predators. The report comes to the following conclusions.

(1) The feeding niches of different predator species are never exactly the same. At the most there is only occasionally an overlap when there is an unusual circumstance, like for instance a population explosion of voles.

(2) Predators never play a significant part in keeping down the prey numbers.

(3) Predation exerts a selective pressure. The species most affected are those which have the greatest abundance. Also predators by attacking young or physically handicapped individuals have been maintaining the health of the stock.

(4) The population of predators is largely affected by that of the prey species. When prey numbers fluctuate predators



first move away and adapt their diet where it is possible. Curiously in some cases males and females of the same species have a different diet as well as a different adult weight, the females being larger.

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The Newsletter often receives articles for publication giving long lists of species observed in an area. In many cases they are so lengthy that their presentation encroaches on the pages of an issue which could be usefully devoted to other interesting articles and notes, with the result readers are deprived of a variety of literature they could otherwise have. Also the striking of such lists is time-consuming; they involve much more attention and care than does plain running matter. The Editor therefore has decided that such lists should not be published in the future, unless, of course, in such rare instances where they are absolutely essential. The Editor therefore requests authors of such faunistic papers to elaborate more on the descriptive portions of their writings so that a fair idea could be conveyed to a reader of what he can expect to find in an area. But for the benefit of such readers who intend visiting the area, and are desirous of having greater details of the avifauna, the authors are requested to send in the lists separately typed from the descriptive part, preferably in duplicate. These will be filed in the office of the Birdwatchers' Club of India, and made available to those wanting them.

#### CORRESPONDENCE

##### Nest building of the Baya Weaver Bird

I have had the July number of the Newsletter already, with the amazing account of the construction of the Weaver Bird's nest. How can it do it? Does Br Navarro know how long (or how short) a time they take in collecting and weaving together 5500+ fibres?

Horace Alexander  
305 Rutgers Ave, Swarthmore  
Pa., U.S.A.

##### Birding at Walkeshwar

We moved to Bombay in late April 1972. The flat occupied by us overlooks the private road to the Governor's House. The trees are in wild natural state. It is a great pleasure to enjoy birdwatching sitting right in our drawing room.

Magpie Robins in July were plentiful and lustily singing from the tree-tops in early hours of the morning. Fantail Flycatchers were also common. On many occasions we have seen

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Grey Hornbills moving from tree to tree but we have not been able to locate their nest.

Only on one occasion we saw a Paradise Flycatcher. It was not seen again thereafter.

The Redwhiskered Bulbuls, Ioras are present. Cuckoos and Crows are also present but it appears the crows have established their nests in nearby trees and the small birds are not frequenting the trees as they were in the beginning.

B. M. Shukla  
3, Walchand Hirachand Marg  
Bombay 1

### Bird news from Chillington, U.K.

Chillington is a lovely part of the country. We have a Spotted Flycatchers' nest with 5 eggs in it (11.vii.1972) on a boundary ledge just about five feet from the ground, and I am eagerly awaiting the young to appear. Many birds have bred already in the garden and the outhouses - Swallows, House Martins, Wrens, Dunnocks, various tits, etc. Even some young Barred Woodpeckers have been in the garden.

D. A. Stairmand  
Oddacombe House Hotel  
Chillington, Kingsbridge  
S. Devon

### Breeding of Purplerumped Sunbirds

Mr J. S. Serrao's note on the breeding of Purplerumped Sunbirds in the Borivli National Park reminds me how in the 'good old times' of not-so-long-ago, when I possessed a garden attached to my bungalow at this very spot on Cumballa Hill, Purplerumped Sunbirds used to nest in the bushes every monsoon. Once a chick fell out of the nest, to the great distress of the parent birds, and we promptly put it back in the nest. It did not come to any harm, and, I believe, it grew up and left the nest in due time.

A. M. Tyabji  
5-C, Somerset Place  
61-D, Bhulabhai Desai Road  
Bombay 26

### Notes from Kashmir

I spent three weeks in Kashmir (15.vii-5.viii). I visited Srinagar, Gulmarg, Pahalgam, Sonamarg, Dachigam and several of the lakes. I found 157 species, including Impeyan Phea-

sant and the Himalayan Snowcock.

Kashmir was frankly disappointing -- all pretty and green -- but all man's greenery, rice, meadows and shade trees. Kashmir is rapidly being completely destroyed by rampant agriculture, logging and overgrazing. There is hardly any accessible high altitude scrub left - it has mostly been devoured by goats. If something isn't done about those damn goats soon, whole portions of the wildlife of the Himalayas will disappear completely.

I feel that I missed a great number of species because of the lack of suitable habitat.

MOST URGENT is agitation for a high altitude national park in Kashmir to save this high altitude scrub fauna (as well as Snow Leopards, Kashmir Stag, etc.) before it is completely lost.

Ben King  
c/o Fulbright House  
12 Hailey Road, New Delhi

### Does the Greyheaded Myna breed in Salsette?

On 18.vi.1972 I was puzzled over the identity of one of the three birds seen feeding on an Acacia catechu a few feet from one another in the Pongam Valley, Borivli National Park, Bombay. Two were Greyheaded Mynas /Sturnus malabarica (malabarica)/. The identity however was solved, when one of the Greyheads approached the unidentifiable bird. The latter flicked open its wings, shivered them, begged for and received food. Seemingly it was a chick hatched in the Park, out foraging with its parents.

The Bombay and Salsette Survey gave Khandalla as the nearest locality to Bombay for the breeding of this bird, where Br A. Navarro, S. J. took an egg from nest on 18.vi.1939 (J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc. 42: 194).

J. S. Serrao

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Zafar Futehally  
Editor, Newsletter for Birdwatchers  
32-A, Juhu Lane, Andheri  
Bombay 58-AS

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### **Editor :**

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# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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VOL XII NO. 10 OCTOBER 1972



NEWSLETTER FOR  
BIRDPATCHERS

Volume 12, Number 10

October 1972

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WHIMBREL (Numenius phaeopus). Part 1

S. V. Nilakanta

Habitat. Some 5000 kilometres due north of Bombay lies that vast marshy tract known as the West Siberian Plain. This huge area, as large as the whole of northern India stretches from the Urals to the Siberian Plateau in west to east direction and from the Arctic Ocean to the Kirgiz Steppe in the north-south direction.

The great rivers Ob and Yenesei with their tributaries slowly flow northwards (the slope being insufficient for rapid progress) through this plain. The gulf of the Ob is some hundreds of kilometres in length and conduces to create vast areas of tidal salt water swamps.

In winter this region is in the grip of severe frost, the temperature seldom rising over  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  and the ground is frozen solid. However, with the advent of spring and with the help of comparatively warm southerly winds the thaw sets in. Soon the ground is converted into oozy slush and all kinds of green moss and swamp vegetation suddenly sprout into life. This in turn provides sustenance for worms, snails and tiny molluscs, crustaceans and a vast variety of life which exists in slimy mud. Such an environment is also most suitable for the breeding of gnats, mosquitoes and other stinging insects which rise

up in black clouds from the swamp. This then is the home of the Whimbrel.

Nesting. The whimbrel's nest is a shallow depression, lined with grass, in the marshy ground. Three or four pear-shaped olive-green eggs, spotted with brown patches are laid in the nest. Not only this swamp but all such-marshy ground along the Arctic Circle is favoured as breeding grounds by curlews, whimbrels, godwits, sandpipers and waders of similar habits. It is also the breeding ground of a variety of duck.

The musical cries of tetti, tetti...tet and the fluty bubbling note of the whimbrel in the breeding season will necessarily be drowned in the cacophony of noise made by so many birds in the vicinity. All these birds which are rather quiet in their winter areas in India and the south are really quite noisy in summer.

Growth. The chicks when hatched out, sometime in June, are precocious. That means that like domestic fowl the chicks are feathered, their eyes are open, they run around and pick up their own food. To achieve this development the incubation period of the eggs has to be long, say 22 days or so.

The chicks huddle close to their mother and obey her implicitly. At a given command they freeze instantaneously and become part of the ground. Their oblitative marking of brown spots is total camouflage.

New-born chicks do not have the long down-curved bill. They have straight short bills and pick up their food from the surface of the ground. As they grow older their bills grow to the long down-curved 95 mm or  $3\frac{3}{4}$  inches so typical of whimbrels and yet smaller than the curlew's 6 inches or 140 mm bill.

There is hardly any sleep or loss of time. As far as Nature is concerned there has been too much loss of time in winter and this can be made up only by furious activity in the brief summer period.

By end June the sun rises in the extreme north at 1 a.m., makes a complete circle reaching its highest position in the south at 12 noon and slowly dips behind the horizon in the north at midnight. There is no loss of daylight, no loss of feeding time and no loss of chlorophyll activity in the green vegetation which primarily gives life to a succession of creatures.

Under these conditions, the ground is literally alive with food and the little whimbrels make rapid progress in their growth. As their bills grow longer they are able to probe deeper into the mud and select still greater varieties of food for their consumption. The nostrils of whimbrels are in long grooves along the bill and probably enable them to breathe while the bill is probed into mud.

In this marvellous marsh, the danger from predators is minimized. For hundreds of kilometres there are no human beings with their guns, dogs, cats and domestic animals.

The marsh will not support the weight of most four-footed animals. Otters, Martens and such animals, although not averse to eating the eggs of ground nesting birds, find plenty of fish and other prey.

There is some danger for young birds from sparrow-hawks and some harriers but most predatory birds have their habitat farther south. The stunted marsh pines of the taiga are probably not suitable for housing a variety of arboreal creatures.

Migration. By July the whimbrels are fully grown. Their beautiful brown crown has a central parting line of white and with two white eye-brow lines are marked exactly like the back of our palm squirrel. The legs are long, the tarsi being 2 inches or 50 mm, and are of a greenish grey colour. The three front toes are joined by webs and the rear toe is rudimentary and does not touch the ground.

The wings are developed to their full length of 25 cm or 10 inches. The whimbrel is about three-fourths the size of a curlew. It is an extremely graceful bird in flight.

In July the wind changes and starts blowing from the North. It also brings some rain from the Arctic Ocean. The young whimbrels are ready to fly and have been gathering together in large flocks.

One day they set off southwards and are greatly helped by the prevailing wind.

Whimbrels are some of the earliest migrants to arrive on the west coast of India and Bombay. They are to be found in the coastal regions of almost all south Asian and African countries.

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## Part 2. By Zafar Futehally

On the morning of Sunday, the 27th August, my stenographer B. D'Cunha brought me news that there were some strange birds with long bills in the Andheri market on sale. In spite of my reluctance to waste a Sunday morning on 'good works' J. S. Serrao who was present persuaded me to go along with him in the cause of bird preservation. It didn't take us too long to locate the six Whimbrels (Numenius phaeopus) with wings and legs tied, and heaped in a corner for a gourmet to come and take them away. I displayed my Game Warden's card before the vendor, and fortunately the Market Supervisor who was around came to my assistance, and enabled me to take away the birds on the undertaking that I would release them in the Versova Creek where apparently they have been netted and caught. However, some of the birds were obviously badly hurt and I thought that the best course would be to release them in my garden where they could recoup before taking off. Immediately they were set free on the lawn they started moving around and in a few minutes one of them called in a very cheering manner a very curlew-like call. Within two hours all but



one had regained considerable mobility and they walked about on the lawn with fair composure. Serrao suggested that one way to get earthworms for them would be to splash soap water over loose ground. We did this and almost immediately a number of earthworms wriggled to the surface. We tried to drive the whimbrels towards this patch without success, but by now the birds had discovered that our lawn contained plenty of food and they were pecking away merrily.

One bird which had been badly hurt fell into our lily pond, and it was fortunate that I discovered it struggling in the water. It was very badly soaked and knowing my own incompetence as a bird doctor I placed the whimbrel on the lawn covering it with a basket and telephoned to V. S. Nilakanta to come to our rescue. Vasant arrived in half an hour with a cage but to our surprise when we lifted the basket the whimbrel walked away quickly and its feathers looked perfectly normal with their natural sheen restored.

I left for Delhi the same evening and next morning at 6 I telephoned my wife and she said that all the whimbrels were in splendid shape and were flapping their wings vigorously. I returned from Delhi on Tuesday night, and I was told that on that day four birds had apparently flown away and only one was left. On Wednesday I took several photographs of this bird and I knew from its general movements that it would not tarry too long. I think that it was on Wednesday evening that the bird flew away.

I do wish that the people who twist the necks of these birds for the pot would sometimes get an opportunity to see them in the wild state. Their large eyes are a most appealing feature, and I am quite certain that watching these creatures alive is a far more rewarding experience than any satisfaction that can be obtained by having them served on the table.

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### Part 3. By S. V. Nilakanta

The injured whimbrel was duly taken away in a cage which was inadequate for such a large bird but incidentally forced it to rest.

The bird had to be force fed with bread and milk and vitamin capsules. After two days of this it was kept by Mr Winston Creado in a hen coup to give it greater freedom of movement. Unfortunately it became very difficult to catch the bird to feed it several times in the day. As its broken wing had mended properly, it was released on Sunday, the 3rd September. The bird remained in Mr Creadow's compound for the rest of the day and could be observed picking up various things and eating them.

The following Sunday while walking on Juhu beach I saw 12 whimbrels flying low directly over me. They were in perfect formation and flew low all the way along the beach until they wheeled to the right and alighted in the Versova Creek.

## BIRDS ON THE SHORE OF THE SUNDERBANS

Ananta Mitra

On the coast of the Bay of Bengal in the forest of the Sunderbans a tiny sea-side village has sprung up into importance, as a seaside resort. It is Bok-Khali, named after the little stream of that name which flows along the eastern fringe of the hamlet and runs into the sea. Very recently a small and picturesque tourist lodge has been built up here by the Forest Department.

Bok-Khali means the streamlet of the herons. Particularly at the point where the stream enters the sea, there are flocks of different birds. They perch on the beach and the banks. Numerous birds are there all along the coast.

I had the pleasant experience of watching and listing some of them on the 26th and 27th of February 1972. On the 26th we started from Calcutta in the early morning and reached the Tourist Lodge within about three hours. The boundless sea and the flocks of lovely birds held out a warm welcome to us. The cool sea-breeze was refreshing.

During about 24 hours of our stay we took account of the birds which we came across. On the edge of the beach, where the breakers were splashing the shores, there were mixed flocks of curlews (Numenius arquata), terns and gulls. A number of curlews were strutting along. The gulls were of two species, the Brownheaded with light grey crowns (Larus brunni-cephalus), and the Blackheaded with completely black heads (Larus ridibundus). The terns were Indian River Terns (Sterna aurantia) and slimmer ones, the Whiskered Terns (Chlidonias hybrida).

We found common sandpipers (Tringa hypoleucos) and Little Stints (Calidris minutus). The latter were in flocks and when flushed were flying in close formations.

The beach at Bok-Khali is undulating. In some places there were ridges, the sand beyond which was quite dry. In other places there were depressions where shallow patches of sea water remains collected. In the dry sand we discovered numerous Sand Plovers (Charadrius mongolus). With their camouflaged plumage they were crouching in the sand. The birds were in groups all along the shore and could be detected only by their movements. In one such group we counted 26 of these lovely, stocky birds.

Near the shallow patches of water we found two kinds of Kingfishers - the Blackcapped Kingfisher (Halcyon pileata) and the Pied Kingfisher (Ceryle rudis), both of them singly, stalking their prey. The hovering flight of the Pied Kingfisher and its sharp sallies were pleasing.

We found here some Sand Martins (Riparia paludicola) perching on drift wood stuck in the sand.

Near the confluence of the streamlet and the sea, the number of curlews, gulls and terns multiplied. There were hundreds of them picking up small marine bodies carried by the waves.

In the bushes on the coast we came across a single Junglefowl (Gallus gallus). It suddenly flashed across our way. Here we found a group of Jungle Babblers (Turdoides striatus).

In the sandy scrub jungles there were a number of Redwattled Lapwing (Vanellus indicus), the area resounding to their calls and shrieks.

Near the Lodge, we listed the Common Myna (Acridotheres tristis), the Pied Myna (Sturnus contra) and the Jungle Crow (Corvus macrorhynchos). In the nearby field where some water had collected there were Pond Herons (Ardeola grayii) and a single Redshank (Tringa totanus).

Just after a brilliant sunset, we were fascinated by the chouunk-chouunk calls of the Longtailed Nightjars (Caprimulgus macrurus). As the moonlit night advanced the powerful calls were thrown out from the depth of the adjoining forest. City dwellers seldom have a chance of encountering this strange sound. In that silent sylvan night the calls seemed like some persuasive appeals from a forlorn person.

Apart from the birds, we found innumerable red crabs strewn over the entire beach. They started vanishing in their holes like magic, as we approached. There we collected one Hermit Crab snuggled inside a sea-shell.

The landscape with the silent forest and the deep sea is magnificent.

## RESCUE OF A SEA GULL

T. V. Jose

On 24.xi.1963, a Sunday, I had the usual morning stroll along the sea shore. Strangely this day I came face to face with an apparently healthy-looking sea gull (Larus brunnicephalus) lying all alone on the embankment leading to the concrete bund that faces Nariman Point. Its lustrous eyes, snowy white feathers dazzling in the morning sun, repeated motion of its head in a semi-circle as if trying to escape, made it a striking sight. When examined the bird was found to be dazed and its motions were not conscious. I disentangled carefully its entwined wings (so done to prevent escape). The poor bird,



remained to be done was to let it fly away. Sea gulls are known to be migratory. We miss them for 4 or 5 months. So, my request to ring the bird and release was accepted by a staff member of the Bombay Natural History Society. Before this happened three more weeks passed by. The bird's copious droppings stank on the floor day and night. Cleaning the rooms every now and then was quite a job for us. Yet we put up with the ordeal very well to observe its activities.

Sometimes our new inmate would venture out, not far, but just around the house. The fowls and dogs of the neighbourhood had no friendly feeling towards this stranger, whom they attacked relentlessly. Perhaps this was the reason why it was not very keen to go out, but it did not make any attempts to fly away needs an explanation. It may also be noted that we never had difficulty to drive the bird back home whenever it was out for some time. It seems the gull rather liked to live under the protection we offered in a place where it also met its three important needs, viz. food, toilet and some exercise.

Where it used to come to drink water from a basin we once set a mirror in such a way that the bird could see its own image, but we are not sure whether it pecked at the mirror or whether it was pecking casually an object quite strange to it or pecking at its own image reflected in the glass. But we can be reasonably sure that it attacked the image and not the mirror; the bird was capable of having three dimensional view of objects.

Its distendable throat is suitable to swallow its food whole. In standing pose its knees are upright like those of other waders. The brow of the sea gull is slanting much like a duck's; the purpose of this peculiarity is not clearly understood. What is more puzzling to me was the bright yellow mouth of this sea gull. Does this suggest that the bird was a juvenile? Bright colour of mouth in young birds is generally associated with their dark nests. Is it the case with sea gulls?

#### BOMBAY INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL VOLUNTEERS - 'CROW CENSUS'

Dilip D'Souza

Raj and I were intrigued. What did Miss Panthaki, our vice-principal, need us for? And on top of it she was calling us during break!

'Sit down, boys', said Miss Panthaki. 'The Bombay Natural History Society has organized a 'Crow Census'. They want to count the number of crows in Bombay. The Bombay International School has volunteered to help . . .'

The outcome of the meeting was that Raj, myself and two boys from Std VII joined this census. You might think that it is impossible to count the crows of Bombay. But we didnt do



quite that. We counted nests.

Now anyone would say that this is an easy job. We too thought so. In the beginning stages it was easy enough. The only sad thing was that we had to give up our Wednesday afternoon co-curricular activities to go crow counting.

Our school had the Gamdevi area; so on our first outing we covered Babulnath Road. We found three nests. We had to jot down the name of the tree, the number of nests, the height they were at (according to the storeys of the nearest building) and classify them: UC, EX, O, PB, FY and D. These symbols stand for: Under Construction, Existing, Occupied, Parents Brooding, Feeding Young and Deserted. This system turned out to be silly in some cases. If a nest was Occupied it had to be Existing! But if we didn't know if it was Occupied we just wrote down Existing and were done with it.

Our third outing (during the summer holidays) was most successful. We found FORTY-FOUR nests that afternoon! There were just three of us: Raj found twenty nests, Miss Panthaki three and I twenty-one. Most of these were Occupied or Existing.

The nice thing about this outing was that we found a nest just outside our class balcony. This was an FY nest and we watched the young growing up. The parents fed them regurgitated food. I realized, only then, that crows are fantastic and quite nice birds. We were all sorry when the babies grew up and flew away.

It was after this third outing that things started getting complicated. I had to make a map of the area we had covered. Later, we started jotting down lamppost numbers to help locate trees. Maps were made of each road. These maps also became complicated. Lampposts and numbers had to be marked. Every tree had a number marked in Roman numerals. Every nest had a number, marked in ordinary figures. To mark a tree and nest what we did finally was something like this (tree number 2 with two nests, numbers 2 and 3): ~~II~~ II, 2, 3.

Figures of trees had to face away from the road. Lampposts were done like this (lamppost DNR 14/5. 'BNR' omitted):

----X---14/5---. The line running through the cross (which is the lamppost) is the side of the road.

Next to every map a chart had to be made with the number of the tree, the name of the tree and the number of nests. Every chart related only to the map of the road it was next to.

Due to a frantic do-or-die rush in the last few days we managed to finish the whole job just two days after the deadline, July 15. The most work was done in the last 15 days. Anyway, it worked out well for us. We learnt a lot about crows. Their nest-building habits, their ways of feeding, their breeding times, all grew familiar. And the Bombay Natural History Society was helped on in its task by us.

## REVIEW

SIXTY INDIAN BIRDS. Text and photographs by R. S. Dharmakumar-sinhji & K. S. Lavkumar. 100 pp. Publications Division. Price Rs25.

This is just the sort of book which every ornithologist hopes to write some day, being a balance mixture of objective fact and subjective enjoyment. The authors describe the habits and habitats of sixty of our commoner birds. But interwoven into the facts are the authors' own experiences with each bird. Different species reacted with different degrees of alarm and flap when the authors set up their hide near their nests. The usual method was to set up the hide some distance from the nest, moving it slightly closer every day, so that by the time it was close enough for photography, the birds would have got used to it. The beautiful colour photographs which were the result of all this activity are reproduced in the book.

While most of our readers are bound to be familiar with the names of both the authors, they are likely to recognize Lavkumar's distinctive style of writing easily. After all, he is one of our most regular contributors. Dharmakumarsinhji's book on the birds of Saurashtra, on the other hand, is a well-known guide to the birds of that area.

It is cheering that the Publications Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting should undertake the publication of a book on birds. But having decided to do it, one cannot help wishing that they had chosen a better press. The printing unfortunately does not really do justice to the excellent photographs.

L.F.

## NOTES &amp; COMMENTS

In the absence of the editor, this issue of the Newsletter has been edited by V. S. Nilkant.

The editor left for Canada in early September to attend the XI General Assembly and XII Technical Meeting of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources in Banff, Alberta. He will later attend the Second Conference on National Parks in Wyoming, U.S.A.

## CORRESPONDENCE

Pied Myna (*Sturnus contra*) in Delhi

My observations on the Pied Myna in Delhi seem to support Mr Horace Alexander's (Newsletter, September 1972).

As a schoolboy in the late fifties and early sixties, I did not see a single Pied Myna in Delhi. They were birds which I saw only on my annual visits to Calcutta. I started seeing these birds occasionally in Delhi in 1967-68. Since then they have become almost common.

In the beginning of 1960 only a few House Crows could be seen in the South Extension area, in the mornings and in the evenings. Now with South Extension completely built up crows can be heard and seen at any time of the day.

D. Ray  
Jamalpur

Birdwatching by night

Within the neighbourhood of St Xavier's High School building in Bombay there are three colonies of birds roosting throughout the year: crows, kites and sparrows. The trees that shelter most of these colonies are acacias, three banyan trees and a large Mohogany tree, five neem trees and a few palm trees. The crows and kites, I am sure, are born and bred around the school. When not on wing, the kites peacefully perch and relax on some of the taller trees, now and then uttering their typical shrills but mostly in the early hours of the day and late in the evenings.

The crows, during the day, can be seen loitering along the roofs and terraces of the school building. In the evenings, once the students leave the school play-grounds, they take it for granted that the play-grounds are left for their evening meetings and amusements.

The sparrows are the only ones that leave their roosting grounds after sunrise and do not return until sunset. The best time of the year to make some observations about the roosting behaviour is in February, when for a short time the trees are denuded of their foliage. If the sky is not cloudy even at night one has a clear view of the birds' silhouette resting on the bare branches.

The crows form small units from four to eight; each unit settles in a separate tree, well distributed throughout the branches. The same crows do not occupy the same tree day after day.

The adaptation of their roosting grounds seems to be the spot where the trees are located, with no preference for any specific tree. The total strength of this colony is roughly about 50 crows.

The kites roost on the canopy of a large and tall acacia; each individual comes at a different and precise time. Each kite perches always on the same branch and rests in the same direction. They form a more compact unit. The strength of this colony is made of 19 birds.

A large number of sparrows roughly a couple of hundreds or even more shelter in a large jak tree in front of the main entrance of the school. A smaller group settles in the nearby trees along the road. Their smaller size and quick shifting from branch to branch makes it rather difficult to have an approximate figure of the total strength of this colony.

A. Navarro, S.J.

Bombay

#### A peculiar colour-phase of a House Crow

I have been seeing a common House Crow, perhaps the same one, for about a year, in Goregaon (West) in the areas around Siddharth Nagar Police Station. Its overall colour is a rarity, at least to me. Whereas normal House Crows have a grey collar this peculiar crow has a dirty white, and its black parts are dark chocolate. The bird presents a striking difference in the company of its own tribe.

Is it a case of albinism?

T. V. Jose

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#### ERRATUM

Newsletter Vol. 12, No. 8, August 1972, pp. 1 and 9  
for P. V. Jose read T. V. Jose

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# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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AN INNOCENT IN ETHIOPIA\*

Aamir Ali

I am not an experienced or knowledgeable birdwatcher. However, on a recent visit to Ethiopia, I was carried away by the fascinating variety of birds I saw, and had a lot of fun birdwatching. I wonder if an account of these efforts might interest readers of the Newsletter.

I was armed with the Field Guide to Birds of East and Central Africa by J. G. Williams, which has an Introduction by Roger Tory Peterson, and follows the pattern of the latter's famous Field Guides for North America and Europe. I looked for something more local and suitable and was told of the Shell Guide to Ethiopian Birds, which would have been just right. A

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\*The connection between the birds of Ethiopia and India is well known, and a reference to the Synopsis of the Birds of India and Pakistan indicates that there are many birds in India of Ethiopian affinity. How is this affinity determined? The systematis first identifies from a study of existing forms, the likely centre of origin of the ancestral stock from which they have radiated and adapted themselves to new environments. A very good example of such 'adaptive radiation' is provided by our Weaver Birds. The headquarters of the subfamily Ploceinae, to which they belong, is Africa south of the Sahara where over 90 species are found. Only five of these, all belonging to the genus Ploceus have spread to Asia, four being currently found in the Indian subcontinent. - Ed.

tour of the bookshops of Addis Ababa proved that it was out of print; the only thing I could get was a very complete bibliography by Emil K. Urban. He is also the author of the Shell Guide and seems to be the closest thing to a Sálim Ali that Ethiopia has. I also tried to get to the Natural History Museum, reputed to be good, but the day I went happened to be the day it was closed.

Addis is a well aerated city, unlike Bombay, with plenty of open spaces and trees. The Ghion Hotel had a lovely and extensive garden, full of bougainvilleas, hibiscus, poinsettias, casuarinas, eucalyptus and many others. It has every reason to be a lovely garden because it used to be one of the Imperial palaces. It is amazing how many things in the country come directly from the Emperor; how jealous our poor de-possessed, de-recognised, de-privileged maharajas must feel.

Looking out from the hotel room was a good beginning. There was the busy, bright metallic blue and copper sunbird flitting among the flowers, the Tacazze Sunbird (Nectarinia tacazze). There was a plump brown robin-like bird, with very clearly marked white stripes above his eyes, like beetling white eyebrows. I thought this might be a Whitebrowed Robin Chat, but later decided that it must be a Brownrumped Seed-eater, which is a horse of a different colour. Talking of horses, the Emperor's stables faced the hotel, and seeing the beautiful horses being groomed in the mornings was a sore distraction from birdwatching. Also in the hotel garden was the Streaky Seedeater (Serinus striolatus). I didn't see either of these seed-eaters outside Addis.

Another common bird that immediately attracted attention was a brown bulbul-like bird, with a crest, speckled chin and throat, and a long tail, gliding from one bush to another. A widow Bird? No. A whydah? No again. It was a Speckled Mousebird (Colius striatus), so called because it is said to look like a mouse creeping among the branches, with his long tail hanging down. This bird was a common sight outside the city too. Once I saw four of them on a bougainvillea branch facing each other and huddled very close together. Either they were cold and seeking warmth or were hatching some secret plot against birdwatchers.

Other common birds in the garden were: the flashing munia-like Redbilled Fire Finch (Lagonosticta senegala) often seen in groups; the yellow and black Baglafaecht Weaver (Ploceus baglafaecht); the Pied Crow (Corvus albus) - it is surprising the respectability a crow can achieve merely by draping a white shawl round him; the Olive Thrush (Turdus olivaceus); the Pinkbreasted and the Ringnecked doves (Streptopelia lugens and capicola); Swainson's Sparrow (Passer swainsonii) and the Black Kite (Milvus migrans), which is like our common Pariah Kite.

An afternoon's drive in the country brought another fascinating bag. On the telephone wires, there was the rather



striking black and white Fiscal Shrike (Lanius collaris). On the ground, a sparrow-sized bird, brownish on top but blue underneath, with a blue tail. And on the cheeks, a bright red spot, shaped rather like a mango pattern. This was the Red-cheeked Cordon Bleu (Uraeginthus bengalus). Why Cordon Bleu? Is it a good cook? Why suddenly have we broken into French? There must be some story behind it, and I would love to know. Later I saw flocks of these birds; the female was less striking than the male, and lacked the spot of rouge on the cheeks. How unfair. It must be enough to drive any self-respecting Cordon Bleu into the arms of Women's Lib.

A long-tailed black and white bird treated us to a dazzling aerobatic display. The Pintailed Whydah (Vidua macroura). Another bird with a long tail alighted on top of a tree and being a perfect gentleman waited patiently while I circled round the tree to get the sun out of my eyes. It was glossy black with a red collar and a red head: the Redcollared Widow Bird (Coliuspasser ardens).

Starlings there were in plenty. The Superb Starling (Spreo superbus) glossy blue on top, white and rufous underneath; and, far more frequent the Blue-eared Glossy Starling (Lamprocolius chalybaeus), dark blue and glossy all over, but with a darker blue patch over the ears.

I had a wonderful two days down at the Rift Valley Lakes, about 200 km from Addis. These lakes vary from fresh water to salt, and the ones I visited, Lakes Langano, Shalla, Abiata, were surrounded by wood and scrub land, with lots of acacia trees.

These were some of the birds seen in this area. Whitebrowed Sparrow Weaver (Plocepasser mahali). Common, gregarious and cheerful. Redbilled Hornbill (Tockus erythrorhynchus). A pair of them were poking about at an ant hill. Do they eat ants? What a big bill for such a small meal. Just like an expensive restaurant, you might say, if you were given to making bad puns. Abyssinian Ground Hornbill (Bucorvus abyssinicus). I saw a pair of these huge black turkey-like birds in the scrub as we drove along a dirt track. I stopped the car and chased after them, looking as grotesque as they did. They flew a little distance, half-heartedly, revealing some white in their wings. Their bills were unmistakably hornbills; their size and shape quite amazing. What do they find to eat on the ground in that dry and dusty area? One of Nature's jokes?

Carmine Bee-eater (Merops nubicus). A remarkable colour. I saw a flock of about eight sitting on an acacia, looking like exotic red fruit, brightening up the landscape.

Amongst other exotics was the Magpie Shrike (Urolestes melano-leucus), which was exactly what one might expect from the name; the Rufouscrowned Roller (Coracias naevia), a striking orange and rosy colour, with a blue tail and whitish stripes on the head; the Yellowbellied Eremomela (Eremomela icteropy-

gialis) a dumpy little warbler, pale yellow and greyish, which seemed to have lost its tail altogether. You could imagine it going round to all those long-tailed birds like the Magpie Shrike, the Widow bird, the Whydah and the Mousebird, telling them they ought to get their tails cut off because it was so much better without one. The Fantailed Raven (Corvus rhipidurus) also with a ridiculously short tail; the little Bee-eater (Melittophagus pusillus), yellow and black and green; the Variable Sunbird (Cinnyris venustus), small and green and iridescent; the Namaqua Dove (Oena capensis) which isn't bigger than a sparrow but unmistakably dove-like.

There were many familiar birds too. There was the Drongo (Dicrurus adsimilis); the Yellow and the White Wagtails (Motacilla flava and alba); the Paradise Flycatcher (Terpsiphone viridis) which was different from the Indian one T. paradisi, being chestnut coloured and not white; the African Hoopoe (Upupa africana) which looked to me exactly like the U. epops which adorns your cover.

Lake Abiata is alkaline, and a mini-Bharatpur. It took some finding. The map showed it was quite close to the main road, but we couldn't see how one got there. Extensive inquiries among the local people revealed only that they were as polite as Indian villagers and were willing to agree to anything we said. Luckily, my driver Asafa, had become as determined as I was to get to the lake. 'Before I was not paying any sharp attention to birds', he said, 'but now I am also giving very sharp attention'. We tried several dirt tracks before one of them led us to the lake and to the hundreds of water birds that it harboured.

There was the Greater Flamingo (Phoenicopterus ruber) in its hundreds. White, seen through a pinkish haze, and a bit larger than the Indian Ph. roseus. There was the Great White Pelican (Pelecanus onocrotalus), also in the hundreds. This I suppose is our Rosy Pelican. There was the Darter (Anhinga rufa), also the same as the Indian. The Cormorant (Phalacrocorax carbo) which seemed to have much more white on its chest than the Indian P. niger. The Yellowbilled Egret (Mesophoyx (= Egretta) intermedius) had a pale yellow bill, but the common Cattle Egret (Bubulcus ibis) could also be found in the region. The Sacred Ibis (Threskiornis aethiopicus) differed from the Indian White Ibis, T. melanocephala, having a black tail and thus being black at both ends and white in the middle. The Marabou Stork (Leptoptilos crumeniferus) looked old and scruffy, shrinking away from the active life around it. It looked a bit like our Adjutant Stork (L. dubius). The Yellowbilled Stork or Wood Ibis (Ibis ibis) [the African counterpart of our Painted Stork] was much more dignified and better groomed than the Marabou. The Blackwinged Stilt (Himantopus himantopus) was the same as we have in India.

Amongst others, there were the Egyptian Goose (Alopochen aegyptiaca); the European Coot (Fulica atra); the Spurwinged Plover (Hoplopterus spinosus); the European Swallow (Hirundo rustica); and the African Sand Martin (Riparia paludicola).

One magnificent sight on the banks of the Awash river was the African Fish Eagle (Haliaeetus vocifer), with its pure white chest, rich chestnut belly, black wings and yellow beak. It was sitting on a branch overhanging the river while four or five hippos wallowed, puffing and blowing, underneath. On the muddy banks of the river, a little lower down, were a few crocodiles asleep in the sun. I waited for over half an hour to see the bird in flight, but it remained unmoved and unmoving. How on earth does it manage to catch any fish in that chocolate coloured water?

Incidentally, while Urban calls the bird Haliaeetus vocifer, Williams refers to it as Cuncuma Vocifer. What's the answer? I put forward both names and you can take your pick.

When we returned to Addis, Mr Mehta, a most pleasant and helpful Indian working in the agency from whom I had hired the car, asked about the trip. When I told him, he said 'Why didn't you tell me you were interested in birdwatching? We have a specially knowledgeable driver for birdwatchers. We get groups of birdwatchers from the UK, organised by an agency called ' , predictably, ' Ornitholidays. Yave you got the Shell Guide to Ethiopian Birds? '

I told him of my fruitless search for this. He produced a copy and gave it to me. 'I wish you had asked me ' he said. 'We always keep a few copies '.

Well, thank you Mr Mehta. If any of you go to Addis, I suggest you go and see him rightaway for advice.

#### OBSERVATIONS ON THE NESTING HABIT OF THE BANDED CRAKE, RALLINA EURIZONOIDES AMAUROPTERA (JERDON)

H. R. Bhat and M. A. Sreenivasan

The Banded Crake, Rallina eurizonoides amauroptera, has a very wide distribution. The range includes India, Ceylon, SE.Asian countries, Formosa, Riu Kiu Islands, Philippines and Celebes. In India it has been found throughout, from the Himalayan terai to Madras and Kerala (Ripley, 1961; Salim Ali, 1953).

Very little has been known about its breeding habit. Salim Ali (1953) has made a mention of the eggs collected in Canara and Hume (1890) had not included this species in his monograph on nests and eggs of Indian birds.

The present communication records some observations on the nesting habit of this bird in Kyasanur Forest disease area, Shimoga district, Mysore State.



On 11th August, one of our field assistants, who had gone for collecting ticks, noticed a bird jumping out of a nest in a semi-evergreen forest adjoining Balagodu village. This was reported to us on the same evening. On 12th August we visited the area accompanied by the assistant. The nesting site was deep inside the forest and was moderately exposed to midday sunlight due to some gaps in the canopy. The ground was covered with thick undergrowth all around. The nest was placed in a cup-shaped cavity on a 70 cm high tree stump, adjacent to an unused cart trail. The nest was a cup-like structure of dry leaves and a few thin sticks. It was partially concealed from three sides by clusters of sprouts from the tree stump and was exposed towards the side facing the cart trail. When we were just two feet away from the nest the bird jumped away from the opposite side and silently disappeared. The bird could not be identified. There were 6 eggs, one of them was broken open on the previous day and a full-grown fledgeling was found in it. The eggs were slightly larger than the eggs of rock pigeon, broadly oval in shape and pure white in colour.

The nest was visited again on 14th evening. The bird was sitting on the nest and could be studied from a distance of a metre, but could not be identified as only the beak and the colour of the back could be seen. After a few seconds the bird jumped out and silently disappeared in the undergrowth. In the nest, three eggs had hatched. One of the fledgelings was already having puffy down and was quite active; other two were still wet with amniotic fluid. The wet down was sticking to the skin.

The nest was revisited on 15th in anticipation of capturing the mother bird with the fledgelings as the other two eggs were also expected to hatch. A mist net was stretched at ground level along the cart trail, so that the bird could be driven on the net from the opposite side. But the bird jumped away before stretching the net completely. After a few seconds the bird was noticed by its croaking signals. It semi-circled around, tried to get back into the nest and got trapped in the net. The bird, along with the fledgelings, was taken to the laboratory and was identified as Banded Crake. The fledgelings were weighing 9 gm each and they had a thick coat of black down, the beak and the legs were plumbeous black. The caruncle on the beak was whitish.

The members of Rallidae are known as swamp inhabiting birds. They usually breed in the close vicinity of their habitats. However in the present instance the Banded Crake had selected a forest habitat for nesting. The nearest tank is c. 500 m from the breeding site.

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## BIRDS OF KIHIM, MAHARASHTRA

Zafar Futehally

On the 14th of October we drove to Kihim over the new bridge leading to the Twin City. On one of the pylons carrying high tension wires there were well over 30 Pariah Kites (Milvus migrans) resting or flying around. Sumant Moolgaokar had told me about this some time ago and there must be a good reason for the birds to congregate here. Who will sit and watch them long enough for an answer?

I knew that the marshes of the Twin City are excellent for birding but in spite of the foreknowledge was struck by the profusion of waders. I had with me my new 500 mm Spiratone tele-lens, and found it thrilling to see birds so closely through the lens with the simultaneous prospect of taking the picture. The result of my 'shooting' is still to be seen and I suspect that the outcome will be poor as I was warned (very ethically, I thought) by the salesman that without a heavy tripod, which I did not possess, results would be blurred.

There were many redshanks (Tringa totanus) noisier than usual and several of them seemed to be young birds judging from the pink colour of their gapes. Greenshanks (Tringa nebularia) were less abundant but invariably called during take off and in flight. I am a poor judge of the Charadriidae but a large number of birds actively feeding in the squelch with a smoky brown half collar and beautiful soft grey plumage seemed to be Grey Plovers (Pluvialis squatarola) from the illustrations in Birds of Britain and Europe, by Peterson, Mountfort and Hollom, which I carried with me. A Common Kingfisher (Alcedo atthis) came within 15 feet while I stood at the edge of the road and looked beautiful through the view finder, and gave me a rare opportunity. I fumbled for a second while focussing and the bird was gone.

There were large flocks of stints and I would not like to assert whether they were the Little (Calidris minutus) or Temminck's (C. temminckii). One little patch of marsh which I reckoned to be 40 ft x 15 ft in area, contained, I thought, at least 150 of two or three species of waders which goes to show how productive these wetland areas are. I hope the planners of the Twin City will preserve some of these marshlands as

sanctuaries, and so make life of the human inhabitants a little more palatable than in old Bombay.

Driving up past the Karnala Sanctuary near Apta village we saw a spectacular sight of 50 Cattle Egrets (Bubulcus ibis) perched on a Pangara (Erythrina indica) tree, and the heads of an equal number were visible standing erect in the tall grass. They were somewhat shy but allowed me to take a few photographs from about 50 yards. The large number scattered in the grasslands were busy eating grasshoppers and other flying insects. Indian Rollers (Coracias benghalensis) were stationed at regular intervals along telegraph wires and so were Black Drongos (Dicrurus adsimilis). During a brief halt in a wooded patch we heard the unmistakable music of Spotted Babblers (Pellorneum ruficeps) punctuated by a few notes from Scimitar Babblers (Pomatorhinus schisticeps).

On reaching Kihim I was delighted to find a group of Terek Sandpiper (Tringa terek) whose upturned bills and pink legs made identification easy. Soon afterwards, the loud kenk, kenk, kenk of the Whitebellied Sea Eagle (Haliaeetus leucogaster) repeated at all hours indicated that the birds were breeding. I saw that the nest, traditionally used on the Casuarina (Casuarina equisetifolia) tree in the compound of 'Dilkusha' was being renovated in preparation for the new arrivals. I did get a few pictures of these birds sailing with their wings held high above their bodies. Last year, perhaps this very pair, had reared two young, but the chicks had, as is customary, been driven away to other areas to fend for themselves and not create scarcity conditions for the parents.

Kihim had its usual complement of bird life and I list some that I noted during a morning's walk on the 15th. Grey Hornbills, Large Green Bee-eaters, Tailor Birds, Redwhiskered Bulbuls, Common Green Bee-eaters, Reef Heron, Rufousbacked Shrikes, Mottled Wood Owls (calling), Curlews, Whimbrels, Scarlet Minivets, Redvented Bulbuls, Whitebrowed Bulbul, Indian Robin, Little Brown Dove, Spotted Doves, Bayas (incidentally many half completed nests high up on a tall casuarina), Brahminy Myna, Blyth's Reed Warbler, Little Egret, Greyheaded Myna, Grey Wagtail, Whitethroated Munia, Common Myna, Iora, Palm Swift, Ashy Swallow Shrikes, and Redwattled Lapwing. I was particularly thrilled to find a cluster of eight Whistling Teal (Dendrocygna javanica) on the seashore just opposite our house. One of them had made itself extremely comfortable by shuffling into the sand and I advanced cautiously under cover of a casuarina tree and managed to take a couple of photographs. I had barely emerged from behind the trunk of the tree in an attempt to get a little nearer when I was spotted and they were away. Salim Ali says that they fly weakly, beating their wings like a jaçana, but nevertheless in a few seconds they were out of sight.

Another bird which rather excited me was a Pied Crested

Cuckoo (Clamator jacobinus). I do not recall seeing this bird in Kihim at this time of the year. It was on a euphorbia bush, and as I advanced it kept flying ahead, keeping at a distance of a hundred yards from me. J. S. Serrao says that he saw a Pied Crested Cuckoo at the Borivli National Park on the same day. Serrao also draws my attention to the latest date of the Pied Crested Cuckoo in Kihim, which is 10.xi, when in 1930 Dr Salim Ali (J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc. 34: 1072) recorded two single birds.

The birdwatching was splendid as always, but it was tragic to see the damage which a poor monsoon had done to the countryside. The rice crop is a total failure. The wells are likely to dry up much before the next monsoon arrives, and only the most vigorous measures from now on can avert human misery in the months to come.

#### VARIANT PLUMAGES IN BIRDS

J. S. Serrao

T. V. Jose, in the October issue of the Newsletter [Vol. 12 (10): 127], refers to a 'peculiar colour-phase' of a House Crow (Corvus splendens), and asks whether it is an instance of albinism. This query regarding albinism often arises in our birdwatching career and I therefore draw readers' attention to three interesting articles on variant plumages by C.J.O. Harrison which appeared some years back:

- 'A variant plumage of the Grey-headed Wagtail Motacilla flava thunbergi Billberg'. Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl. 81(3): 47-8; March 1961
- 'Non-melanic, carotenistic and allied variant plumages in birds'. ibid. 83(5): 90-6; May 1963
- 'Grey and fawn variant plumages'. Bird Study 10(4): 219-33; 1963

These articles give an explanation of variant plumages, and list instances from 13 bird families. Birdwatchers intending to read through these articles would find them in the library of the Bombay Natural History Society, as also some of the references cited with them.

Colour variants, according to the author, occur in birds whose plumage contains melanin pigments, the variants being the result of absence of these pigments. Such loss of melanin pigments is termed schizochroism. When melanic schizochroism occurs, it produces a grey or fawn variety, and this is brought about by loss or suppression of eumelanin or phaeomelanin in the plumage. Schizochroism is of two types: (1) 'Leucistic', and (2) 'Albinistic'. In 'Leucistic' individuals, melanin pigments are present in the body, resulting in dark



eyes and coloured bare parts, but melanin does not enter the feather structure, with the result that the plumage is white. 'Albinistic' individuals show an absence of melanin both in the body and the feather structure, and such individuals have pink coloured eyes.

There are two forms of variant plumage which could be confused with schizochroism: (1) Dilution, involving reduction in quantity of all pigments present, and (2) Erythrism, wherein eumelanin, and possibly phaeomelanin, is replaced by a third, chestnut-red melanin, producing forms similar to grey or fawn varieties.

Reverting to the crow reported by Mr Jose, it does not appear to be an albino. Mr Jose has had it under observation for about a year before reporting it, and if it were really an albino, he would have noticed its having pink eyes - the yardstick of albinism.

#### NOTES AND COMMENTS

The Smithsonian Institution's Center for Short-lived Phenomena continues to send out horrifying information about the death of birds and other species of life from every corner of the world. Here is an example:

' There has been a martin mortality in Pennsylvania, quite possibly as a result of tropical storm Agnes. The Waynesburg Republican reported a 90% loss of these birds in Greene County. Hundreds died in the Univ. Park area.

' There had been no spraying of insecticide in Greene County prior to the bird deaths. There is speculation that there was too much rain for insects to fly and that the birds therefore starved to death. Martins, a type of swallow, feed on the wing. They apparently do not like to gather insects from the ground.'

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Ten favourite birds. Kameshwar Pd Singh, Lecturer, A.N.S. College, Barh, U.P. gives the following as his ten favourite birds:

Golden Oriole  
Purple Sunbird  
Goldenbacked Woodpecker  
Brahminy Duck  
Sparrow Hawk

Redvented Bulbul  
Redwinged Bush Lark  
Yellow Wagtail  
Red Munia  
Bronzewinged Jacana

Judging from the lists submitted by D. A. Stairmand, R. E. Hawkins, K. S. Dharmakumarsinhji, K. K. Neelakantan, K. S. Lavkumar, Dinesh Mohan and Kameshwar Pd Singh, the Golden Oriole and the Purple Sunbird share the honours equally for the first place in popularity. In view of the extraordinary



beauty and charm of these two birds it is not surprising that they are such favourites.

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During a recent visit to Canada and the United States the Editor saw a great many beautiful birds. It was cheering to learn that the Trumpeter Swan (Cygnus buccinator) which only ten years ago was considered to be a highly endangered species has now multiplied vigorously as a result of complete protection and is out of danger. One of the best birding experiences was at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Utah State. This Refuge has an area of 65,000 acres, most of which is excellent waterfowl habitat. It was fascinating to see Avocets and Western Grebes at very close range. The Western Grebe as will be recalled was a bird which suffered greatly from DDT, and Rachel Carson drew attention to the fate of these birds with great feeling in her book Silent Spring. The cleaning up process of the environment and banning the use of DDT in the New World has already been reflected in the rehabilitation of birds like these grebes, which live largely on fish. The ingestion of DDT by fish when it was recklessly sprayed led to a high concentration of this non-biodegradable material in the tissues of birds and adversely affected their fertility.

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The XIIth Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' Field Club of India will be held on Friday, the 15th December 1972. The Agenda as well as the time and venue of the meeting will be announced in the December issue. This advance notice is to ensure that there will be a large turn out of members and is also a request to all to send in their suggestions for improving the Newsletter and making it livelier and more informative and useful. The Editor recognizes that these aspects are closely connected with the qualities of the Editor, and suggestions for replacing the present incumbent should be sent without any inhibition.

#### CORRESPONDENCE

##### An effort at Bird Preservation.

The Bird Wing of the Panda Club (a student group of World Wildlife India) had a 'lucky dip' at Crawford Market recently. A couple of Whimbrels were being sold in a tiny basket, cramped and suffocated, for meat. As an SPCA member was with the group, the birds were confiscated on grounds of cruelty. They are now in a private aviary.

Miss Zahida Futehally  
Andheri, Bombay

[They could, of course, have been confiscated under the provisions of the Bombay Wild Animals and Wild Birds Protection Act 1951, which prohibits the trapping of birds for commercial sale. - Ed.]

### Birdwatching in a U.P. garden

With the coming of winter mornings in Roorkee are getting very crisp and pleasant. The migratory birds have also started arriving. The Grey Wagtail and Common Redstart were seen for the first time a couple of days back. There is a bottlebrush tree in my front garden. It is just coming into bloom. With the first rays of the morning sun on this tree the bird activity is also very interesting to watch. This morning it was very fascinating to watch hordes of White-eyes, Brahminy Mynas, Redvented Bulbuls and Purple Sunbirds storming the tree and filling it with their varied music. It was specifically interesting to watch Purple Sunbirds pecking at the bottlebrush flowers with their pointed beaks, their body fluttering and suspended in the mid air. The White-eyes with the spectacle round their eyes are also very attractive to watch. Nearby, an electric transmission line, I could see flocks of Common Green Bee-eaters and Brahminy Mynas watching their friends storming the bottlebrush tree. I had also short glimpses of Minivets, Magpie-Robin and the Lesser Whitethroat. It was indeed a glorious sight.

Prof. Dinesh Mohan  
Roorkee, U.P.  
28 Sept. 1972

### Forest Wagtail (Motacilla indica) in Bombay

On 22.x.1972 I disturbed a Forest Wagtail (Motacilla indica) feeding under a chikoo tree in Mr Nazar Futehally's compound at Andheri. It flew up into the tree uttering its characteristic pink, pink and kept on moving about the branches shaking its tail from side to side until I move away. On subsequent visits I failed to come across it.

The Bombay and Salsette Survey records a specimen obtained in Chembur on 30.iii and states that it did not come across it elsewhere in the Salsette. Published records of the bird in our area, as far as I am aware, refer to its presence during its northward passage in March/April.

J. S. Serrao

[I have seen this bird in the same compound a few years ago. - Ed.]

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32A, Juhu Lane, Andheri  
Bombay 58-AS

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# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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BIRDWATCHERS' FIELD CLUB OF INDIA

Phone: 574024

32A, C. D. Barfiwala Marg  
(Formerly Juhu Lane)  
Andheri, Bombay 58-AS

N O T I C E

The XIIth Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' <sup>Field</sup> Club of India will be held on Saturday, 23rd December 1972 at 4.30 p.m. at the residence of the Honorary Secretary, at 32A, C. D. Barfiwala Marg (Formerly Juhu Lane), Andheri, Bombay 58-AS, when members are requested to be present.

A G E N D A

1. To elect a Chairman for the meeting
2. To get a report from the Honorary Secretary on the working of the Club
3. To get a report from the Honorary Treasurer regarding accounts
4. To consider suggestions from members about the Newsletter and about the activities of the Club
5. To elect the Editorial Board for the coming year
6. Any other business with the permission of the Chair.

28 November 1972

*Zafar Futehally*  
Zafar Futehally  
Honorary Secretary

30/11/72

INTERNATIONAL WATERFOWL RESEARCH BUREAU

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ASIATIC WILDFOWL SURVEY

International Wildfowl Counts 1972/73

As you may know, the Ramsar Convention for the Conservation of Wetlands of International Importance has now been opened for signature and will shortly be coming into force. We very much hope that your Government will be acceding to this Convention and we assume that in due course it will. This is an historic development and makes the annual International Censuses of waterfowl more important than ever since the usage of wetlands by waterfowl is one of the principal factors in determining their importance.

In Asia it is impracticable to have the census on one day as is done in European countries, but the objective is to obtain as accurate information as possible on the position obtaining in mid January and mid November.

I should be grateful for your assistance in the following:

i) a request to all experienced ornithologists to make counts of waterfowl on the enclosed forms in respect of all or any areas which they can cover during the month of January. The most important concentrations of birds should be counted as near as possible to January 15, 1973. Details of other counts or observations would be appreciated especially any made in November.

ii) a request to the authorities or individuals responsible for administration of game/wildlife protection to make estimates of numbers of waterfowl in their areas on the simplified proforma enclosed (which we should be glad if you would translate or adapt for local conditions). These estimates should preferably be made by two people working together in order to improve accuracy.

iii) all replies should either be sent to you or direct to the Bureau by January 31 so that they may be received at the Bureau by early February.

I enclose a sample simplified count form for use by non-ornithologists.

To simplify processing and recording of information it would be appreciated if all correspondence could be addressed to:

The Asiatic Wildfowl Survey  
International Waterfowl Research Bureau  
Slimbridge  
Gloucester GL 2 7EX, England

C. D. W. Savage  
Hon. Coordinator  
Asiatic Wildfowl Survey

Sample Simplified Count Form

ASIATIC WILDFOWL SURVEY

International Wildfowl Counts 1972/73

Country.....

Province/State.....

District.....

Names of Observers.....

.....

Department/Institution/Address.....

.....

.....

Name of Wetland area .....

Nearest town .....

Geographical location Lat.....<sup>o</sup>N Long.....<sup>o</sup>E.....<sup>o</sup>N.....<sup>o</sup>E .....

Date of observation .../.../... .....

PELICANS .....

FLAMINGOS .....

GEESE .....

SWANS .....

DUCKS .....

CRANES .....

COOTS .....

Remarks (on weather and water conditions) .....

Signatures .....

Date ....../...../.....

NEWSLETTER FOR  
BIRDWATCHERS

Volume 12, Number 12

December 1972

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BIRDWATCHING ON BANJARA HILLS, HYDERABAD

Capt. N. S. Tyabji

The Banjara Hills of Hyderabad named after the original inhabitants - the Banjaras or local gypsies - form part of the vast complex of low, bare, rocky hills which are a typical feature of the Deccan plateau. The extension of the complex lying to the west of the Twincities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad, constitute the developed and inhabited segment of the otherwise desolate and broken terrain which supports nothing but thorny scrub with intermittent patches of sparse grass between sheets of granite and limestone. These hills in their pristine state might almost serve as an earth-scale model of the imagined Martian landscape.

The eastern slopes of these hills were first settled in the early twenties and have now been developed into one of the most attractive residential areas within the Twincities limits, with fairly extensive gardens planted with large shady trees like mango, neem, peepal, jamoon and gul-mohur as also a large variety of flowering shrubs, plants and climbers which have transformed the once arid hills and slopes into well-wooded arboreous country.

This transformation in terms of flora has obviously had a significant effect on the variety of birdlife to be found here as against the arid virgin areas adjoining it.

In addition to these two distinct habitats - arid and arboreal - there is a third which may be said to belong to



the virgin lands, though here again man seems to have taken a hand not only in perpetuating its existence but extending its 'pockets', in the process of excavating much-needed soil for filling and top-dressing purposes. These comprise the tanks as well as marshy patches in low-lying areas ensconced within the numerous valleys and 'bowls' complementary to the ridges and hills. The majority of these are tiny and rock-girt; some clear of vegetation and others fringed with reeds and covered with lotus. These provide an ecological niche for a few specialised species.

Though there are some species which confine themselves to the bare hills and wetlands, the major concentration is in the residential areas, a few of which extend their activities to the adjoining areas as well.

The list appended to the note shows birds under the habitat in which first sighted. Those whose local range overlaps the adjoining habitats have been indicated with an asterisk.

Suitable and adequate food in two differing but adjoining habitats seems to be the over-riding reason for some species belonging to the insectivore and carnivore categories spreading their activities over such physically disparate areas - one lush and the other arid.

A list of species with overlapping habitats makes this obvious - the Indian Robin, Redvented Bulbul, Large Pied Wagtail, Common Green Bee-eater, Spotted Dove and Common Myna among the insectivores and the Common Pariah Kite, White Scavenger Vulture, Spotted Owlet, Common Kingfisher, Whitebreasted Kingfisher and the Shikra among the carnivores.

There are, of course, a number of other birds which may on occasion wander from one habitat to the other but these excursions, because of their infrequency, can only be in the nature of speculative wanderings rather than routine coverage of the area concerned. Species in this category are the Hoopoe, House Swift and Whitethroated Munia (on patches of seeding grass).

Among birds with dual habitats, the only one found nesting in both, is the Indian Robin.

The others as far as I can make out at this stage, confine their nesting within the arboreal limits.

This year's drought has played havoc with the delightful little tanks and wetlands hidden away in the valleys which are in the process of contracting and drying up at this time of the year. One such over-flow tank at the lower end of a long narrow valley in which two pairs of Jacana and a family of Dabchick (6 birds) had been under observation since July 1972 has now been otatally deserted by these birds. The Jacana had nested there and whilst the mature birds left the tank for perhaps a more hospitable site about 18 October, two immature birds have continued in the tank till the present -- November 13. The lone Dabchick last seen on 23 October, had also left by 9.xi. The tank had obviously lost its utility

because of shrinkage in area as well as depth; there being probably less than 12 inches of water in the middle. Whatever water there is, is still covered with lotus and rank vegetation, with a fringe of dense reed-beds all round.

However, the tank still seems to offer some attraction to a couple of Pond Herons and the Common- and Whitebreasted Kingfisher, but the Large Pied Wagtail seems to be having the best of it. With the drop in water-level, a number of isolated rocks have been exposed which offer excellent hunting perches for individuals of this species. On the evening of 9.xi, as I watched, three wagtails took up station on three such pinnacles and the ensuing display of precision aerobatics was quite breath-taking in its virtuosity. The surface of the vegetation-choked tank was swarming with flying insects and the birds seemed determined to do full justice to the challenging sport offered.

On 7.xi I also came across a flock of 10 Whitethroated Munia perched on a babul by the side of a sward of green seeding grass which seemed to hold special attraction. The birds fluttered down in twos and threes and busied themselves with the seed; at one time, the whole flock was on the ground and must have come up to within 5 feet of where I was standing, quite unconcerned at my presence in their midst.

As I stood watching them at their feed, I noticed another small form flitting on the stony, broken ground close by which on a closer inspection turned out to be Franklin's Wren-Warbler, also bent upon acquiring a decent meal before taking to its roost for the night. It advanced over the ground in little hops and flutters chasing insects on the wing and finally disappeared from view behind a large boulder. I considered it a good evening, well spent, and called it a day.

Birds sighted with the Banjara Hills Complex between  
1.xi.1972 and 13.xi.1972

- a) ARID: Indian Small Skylark (Alauda quila); 2. Rufoustailed Finch-Lark (Ammomanes phoenicurus); 3. Sykes's Crested Lark (Galerida deva); 4. Redwinged Bush Lark (Mirafra erythroptera); 5. Blackbellied Finch-Lark (Eremopterix grisea); 6. Indian Pipit (Anthus novaeseelandiae); 7. Tawny Pipit (Anthus campestris); 8. Franklin's Wren Warbler (Franklinia gracilis); 9. Blue Rock Thrush (Monticola solitarius); 10. Rock Bush Quail (Perdicula argoondah); 11. Indian Great Horned Owl (Bubo bubo); 12. Redwattled Lapwing (Vanellus indicus); 13. Tawny Eagle (Aquila rapax); \*14. Common Pariah Kite (Milvus migrans); \*15. White Scavenger Vulture (Neophron percnopterus).

b) WETLANDS. Pheasant-tailed Jacana (Hydrophasianus chirurgus);  
 2. Snakebird (Anhinga rufa); 3. Cattle Egret (Bubulcus ibis);  
 4. Dabchick (Podiceps ruficollis); \*5. Common Kingfisher (Alcedo atthis); \*6. Whitebreasted Kingfisher (Halcyon smyrnensis);  
 7. Pond Heron (Ardeola grayii)

c) ARBOREAL. House Crow (Corvus splendens); 2. Jungle Crow (Corvus macrorhynchos); 3. Tree Pie (Dendrocitta vagabunda);  
 4. Whiteheaded Babbler (Turdoides striatus); 5. Common Iora (Aegithina tiphia); \*6. Redvented Bulbul (Pycnonotus cafer);  
 \*7. Indian Robin (Saxicoloides fulicata); 8. Magpie Robin (Copsychus saularis); 9. Verditer Flycatcher (Muscicapa thalassina); 10. Small Minivet (Pericrocotus cinnamomeus); 11. Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike (Coracina melanoptera); 12. Black Drongo (Dicrurus adsimilis); 13. Tailor Bird (Orthotomus sutorius);  
 14. Ashy Wren-Warbler (Prinia socialis); 15. Golden Oriole (Oriolus oriolus); \*16. Common Myna (Acridotheres tristis);  
 \*17. Brahminy Myna (Sturnus pagodarum); 18. Common Baya (Ploceus philippinus); \*19. Whitethroated Munia (Lonchura striata);  
 20. Spotted Munia (Lonchura punctulata); 21. House Sparrow (Passer domesticus); \*22. Large Pied Wagtail (Motacilla madraspatensis); 23. Grey Wagtail (Motacilla cinerea); 24. Purple-rumped Sunbird (Nectarinia zeylonica); 25. Tickell's Flowerpecker (Dicaeum erythrorhynchos); 26. Goldenbacked Woodpecker (Dinopium benghalense); 27. Crimsonbreasted Barbet (Megalaima haemacephala); 28. Common Hawk-Cuckoo (Cuculus varius); 29. Pied Crested Cuckoo (Clamator jacobinus); 30. Koel (Eudynamys scolopacea); 31. Crow Pheasant (Centropus sinensis); 32. Large Indian Parakeet (Psittacula eupatria); 33. Roseringed Parakeet (Psittacula krameri); 34. Blossomheaded Parakeet (Psittacula cyanocephala); 35. Indian Roller (Coracias benghalensis); \*36. Common Green Bee-eater (Merops orientalis); 37. Common Grey Hornbill (Tockus birostris); 38. Hoopoe (Upupa epops); \*39. House Swift (Apus affinis); \*40. Spotted Owlet (Athene brama);  
 \*41. Shikra (Accipiter badius); 42. Blue Rock Pigeon (Columba livia); \*43. Spotted Dove (Streptopelia chinensis); 44. Common Wood Shrike (Tephrodornis pondicerianus); 45. Lesser White-throat (Sylvia curruca).

## BIRDS AROUND AHMEDABAD, GUJARAT

Zafar Futehally

During a journey on 1.xi.1972 from Ahmedabad to Anand in Gujarat State in a taxi, I was very surprised to see the wealth of birdlife around the roads and also to find how close an approach they allowed. Obviously the respect for life which the inhabitants of Gujarat have, make the birds much less suspicious of humans than in neighbouring Maharashtra. A large number of visitors from India and abroad now travel on this



50 mile stretch between Anand and Ahmedabad because it is the headquarters of one of the most progressive schemes in the country. The Amul Dairy and Operation Flood masterminded by Dr Kurien of the National Dairy Development Board show how much wealth can be generated if our plans are based squarely on the natural resources of a region. Dairy development and increased agricultural productivity should not prevent human beings from co-existing with avians. The only aspect to be guarded against is the excessive use of chemical fertilizers in the fields. Birds are a very good indicator of the natural health of the environment and I am submitting a list of the birds I saw during my trip as a base line on which others can build.

I recognize that I am going against the editorial policy announced earlier of not cluttering the Newsletter with long lists, but every rule must be broken occasionally.

Chandula Tank near Ahmedabad contains a large number of waterfowl (at least 500) and would qualify as a wetland of importance.

This note is being sent to the Chief Conservator of Forests, Gujarat State with a request to send more details of the waterfowl of the tank, and also to fill up the wetlands survey sheet which has been designed by Dr Salim Ali for the National Committee for Environmental Planning and Coordination.

#### List of Birds seen

Grey Herons (Ardea cinerea)  
 Pond Herons (Ardeola grayi)  
 Cattle Egrets (Bubulcus ibis): walking very close to humans ploughing the fields, using them to raise insects in the same way that cattle do  
 Large Egret (Egretta alba): solitary as usual  
 Middle Egret (Egretta intermedia)  
 Openbilled Storks (Anastomus oscitans)  
 Whitenecked Stork (Ciconia episcopus)  
 Black Ibis (Pseudibis papillosa)  
 Whistling Teals (Dendrocygna javanica)  
 Brahminy Duck (Tadorna ferruginea)  
 Wigeons (Anas penelope)  
 Shovellers (Anas clypeata)  
 Blackwinged Kites (Elanus caeruleus)  
 Pariah Kites (Milvus migrans)  
 White-eyed Buzzards (Butastur teesa)  
 Whitebacked Vulture (Gyps bengalensis)  
 Scavenger Vulture (Neophron percnopterus)  
 Sarus Cranes (Grus antigone)  
 Coots (Fulica atra)  
 Pheasant-tailed Jacanas (Hydrophasianus chirurgus), tailless and not too beautiful  
 Redwattled Lapwing (Vanellus indicus) quite a congregation in certain places



Blacktailed Godwit (Limosa limosa)  
 Green Sandpiper (Tringa ochropus)  
 Common Sandpiper (Tringa hypoleucos)  
 Blackwinged Stilts (Himantopus himantopus): feeding both from the surface of the water as well as by probing the bottom of the pond. When they fed from the bottom their eyes were completely submerged. There were several of these birds 40 miles from Ahmedabad at the Petlad crossing.  
 Blue Rock Pigeons (Columba livia)  
 Indian Ring Doves (Streptopelia decaocto)  
 Common Green Bee-eater (Merops orientalis)  
 Rollers or Blue Jays. Majority of them were Indian Rollers (Coracias benghalensis). One was suspected to be Kashmir Roller (Coracias garrulus).  
 Hoopoe (Upupa epops)  
 Blackbellied Finch-Lark (Eremopterix grisea)  
 Common Swallows (Hirundo rustica)  
 Redrumped Swallows (Hirundo daurica)  
 Rufousbacked Shrike (Lanius schach)  
 Black Drongos (Dicrurus adsimilis)  
 Common Mynas (Acridotheres tristis)  
 Bank Mynas (Acridotheres gigninianus)  
 Tree Pie (Dendrocitta vagabunda). These birds always gave themselves away by their harsh calls.  
 House Crow (Corvus splendens)  
 Redvented Bulbuls (Pycnonotus cafer)  
 Pied Chat (Oenanthe picata)  
 Indian Robins (Saxicoloides fulicata). Two male birds very aggressively inclined to each other; perhaps for territorial reasons.  
 Large Grey Babblers (Turdoides malcolmi)  
 Yellowheaded Wagtail (Motacilla citreola)  
 White Wagtails (Motacilla alba): both the Indian (dukhunensis) with white ear-coverts, and the Masked (personata) with black ear-coverts were present.  
 Purple Sunbird (Nectarinia asiatica)  
 House Sparrow (Passer domesticus)

## A FAREWELL TO MARVE

D. A. Stairmand

My last turn on the roster for a week-end at the Company's beach Shack at Erangal, Marve (Bombay) came in the second week of April 1971. When I first started using this Shack at the end of 1968 I could go there three or four times in a month if I felt like it, and I often did. In those days and up to mid 1970 we had kerosene lamps, an ice-box and no mosquito-proofing. Then came the electricity supply and all sorts of 'improvements' - for example strip neon lighting,

a refrigerator (there was nothing wrong with the old ice-box that a purchase of more ice couldn't cure), mosquito-proofing and electric fans. The fans became necessary because of stifling effect of the mosquito-proofing! All these ingenious improvements made the Shack popular with my colleagues and limited my visits to the correct ratio - one week-end in eight. So maybe I was a little biased about all the progress. There were, however, many other signs of 'progress'. We lost nearly all our front garden as this was to become part of a road to an Hotel or Chalets - I forget which. The garden had never been at all big but I had watched many birds in it - Golden Orioles, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Fantail Flycatchers, Cuckoo Shrikes, Redstart, Whitebrowed Bulbuls, Koels, etc., etc., and now there was room only for a few nervous Red-whiskered and Redvented Bulbuls, Common Mynas, Crows, Sparrows, Spotted Doves, Indian and Magpie Robins, Ashy Wren Warblers, Tailor Birds and Purplerumped Sunbirds. A depletion of garden birds from about 50 down to a mere dozen. The hillock on which the hotel or chalets were to be built was my favourite hillock to the left of the Shack and in front of Erangal Village. What marvellous times I had had there - and soon it was to go. Another hill nearby had already been destroyed and shorn of vegetation and trees by mammoth earth-removing.

The above recounting of the recent history does not mean that I still did not enjoy myself a great deal at Erangal - it just points out the deterioration, and what 'progress' all too often means to many people. The majority like it; an increasing minority don't. Anyway not when it affects nature adversely, and in this instance, in any case, might well have been avoided by further development of Juhu Beach, which was already largely spoiled. So to birding! (sorry about that preamble!).

I was lucky to have the long week-end over Easter and although I had to make a frantic dash into Office on the Saturday morning I was soon back at the Shack again. The nights were almost unbearably hot (damn that mosquito-proofing) but a good breeze got up during the day and sitting on rocks near the water's edge was extremely pleasant even at midday. Also - as they always are in April - the trees were splendid. Magnificent Kusims were in bronze leaf and had flower sprays; Pongams also had flower sprays, Kaju had their cashew-nuts (a valuable commodity indeed!), some Banyans were in fig, Corals had pods and White Silk Cottons were in flower, and then there was the honey-scent of Terminalia.

Many waders were bunched up on the rocks at high tide. One day there were c. 500 small waders - mostly Sandpipers, Ringed Plovers, Turnstones and Stints, massed together on a few rocks. Another time I got close to a most colourful collection of birds on rocks. There were some 30 Turnstones, 60 Golden Plovers, 3 Grey Plovers, 2 Broadbilled Sandpipers and

several Sanderlings - all of them almost in full summer (breeding) dress and how beautiful they were! It is a revelation to see how drab waders of winter suddenly emerge in spring to become beautiful strongly coloured birds.

On my dash back from Office on Saturday morning I had stopped off at Mahim Creek and seen over 100 Stilts there and now as I drove past some inundated mudflats at Marve I saw - and stopped to watch - 5 huge and handsome Terns resting; they were the Caspian Terns, with their huge coral bills and black caps. I rarely saw these at Marve. The Gullbilled Tern was common there and several week-ends - including the one I'm writing about - there were small parties of Little Terns to be seen fishing above the beautiful sea and waves.

Other birds in glorious plumage were Yellow Wagtails and these were in parties of up to 10 birds. That week-end there were few Common Swallows. Just two weeks before there had been hundreds and hundreds of them - perhaps thousands - swirling around and resting on my favourite hillock. They must have collected there prior to migration and there were a large number of House Swifts with them. This was unusual, too, as the 'common' swift at Marve is the Palm Swift.

It seemed that the Hoopoes, Orioles, Wheatears, Redstarts and Rollers had departed from Marve but Rufousbacked Shrikes were still quite common. How common they are in Bombay at the beginning of October! I always see the good side of Shrikes. I've seen them eat thousands of insects but never a bird. And they are handsome and fascinating birds.

New arrivals on the hillock were the attractive Yellow Wattled Lapwings and old residents were Pipits, Blackbellied and Rufoustailed Finch-Larks, Crested Larks, and many other of our common birds.

I saw a Blackwinged Kite that week-end. Not a very usual occurrence for me there. Unfortunately there were no Ospreys or White-eyed Buzzards to be seen. I did, however, see that delightful little bird, the Spotted Owlet. Paddy Birds and Cattle Egrets were attaining summer plumage.

Other birds? Well, so many really. I hardly think I can fail to mention Coppersmiths, Drongos, Koels, Coucals, Small Minivets, Whitebreasted Kingfishers, Dabchicks on a small tank, Bee-eaters, Ashy Wren Warblers singing so cheekily from exposed points, 3 species of bulbuls, two babblers, Ioras, kites, Redwattled Lapwings, Blossomheaded Parakeets.

Did I see 50 or about 100 species that week-end? I don't know. I could check but it hardly matters. Despite all the improvements, eyesores and destruction of habitat it was glorious. And as, at the time, I did not realize that was to be my last week-end at Marve I was not trying too hard.

It was just a 'normal' week-end there. In other words - just fantastic.

## BIRD NOTES FROM AROUND BOMBAY

G. De

My observation of the Pied Crested Cuckoo (Clamator jacobinus) in October of this year is as follows:

1.x.1972	....	1
2.x.1972	....	12
8.x.1972	....	2
10.x.1972	....	2

These observations were confined to about 20 acres of scrub-land at Vihar Lake and in the morning hours when the birds were looking for food among the bushes. They never called and sometimes permitted movement even 10 yards away.

In the earlier years one to six birds have been observed in this area in October days. Occasionally one or two haggard-looking birds can be seen in the bushes around Vihar Lake even in the month of November.

Just after monsoon Vihar Lake area received the first group of raptors of the season. This October the following guests have been observed:

- 2 - White-eyed Buzzard-Eagle (one being juvenile)
- 2 - Blackwinged Kite
- 1 - Peregrine Falcon (juv.)
- 1 - Pale Harrier (juv.)

Only the adult Buzzard-Eagle was not seen for more than 3 days. Others are there for about a month. Shikras and Sparrow-Hawks are also there. But their numbers are difficult to ascertain.

It may be interesting to note that I heard once the Peregrine calling. Call-notes were exactly same as described in the Field Guide, Peterson et al.

Vihar and Powai lakes seem to receive waterfowl visitors later than other parts of Maharashtra. Till 12.xi at Powai 90 Common Teal have been seen and at Vihar only 6 up to a week before. All were females. However at Vihar 2 Brahminy Ducks were seen on 6.xi, almost at the same place as in the last year.

## NOTES AND COMMENTS

XIIth Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' Club

In the Newsletter for November 1972 it was announced that the XIIth Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' Club of India will be held on 15 December 1972. It has now been decided to hold it on Saturday, 23 December 1972 at 4.30 p.m.



10

at the residence of the Editor,

32A, C. D. Barfiwala Marg  
(Formerly Juhu Lane)  
Andheri

We hope that many members will be able to come.

It would be a help if those members who intend attending drop a postcard so that adequate arrangements can be made for seating in the garden and for serving refreshments. If it is more convenient please give this information on telephone No. 574024.

\*

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Readers will recall that in earlier years Mr C. D. W. Savage used to send out Waterfowl Survey sheets and several of these were returned to him when he was operating from Lahore. Mr Savage was in India recently and requested the editor to circulate the enquiry sheets again with our Newsletter. We hope it will be possible for many of our readers to send the sheets back to the Newsletter duly completed before the 31st January 1973.

#### CORRESPONDENCE

##### A Shearwater and a Tropic Bird at Juhu, Bombay

One morning in July, I watched a Shearwater at Juhu - a sooty coloured dove-sized bird that kept diving exultantly into the rabid monsoon surf, submerging completely each time, and being cast upon the shore, only to fly back in and renew its assault upon the advancing tide.

That same evening, I found a Redbilled Tropic Bird (Phaethon aethereus indicus) washed out upon the shore. The bird was in a relatively fresh state of plumage and must have been drowned not too long before.

This rather saddened me, for Tropic Birds, I feel, are amongst the most ravishingly beautiful of all birds, and just some time before I had completed a painting of Tropic Birds sailing down the aerial drifts of sunset cloud.

I believe that only two specimens of this bird have been taken on the Indian shore (one by Br. Navarro, S.J.).

Anyway, I removed the long tail plume; it makes a goodly quill pen, and in future, I shall write all my romantic poetry with it.

Winston Creado  
Silver Beach Estate  
Juhu, Bombay

[Sinclair writing in the J. Bombay nat. Hist. Society in 1889 included the Tropic Birds among the premonsoon strays and swept-ins in Bombay, and said that they were not uncommon on Konkan coast between 16 and 21°N. latitude. Navarro, S.J. sight recorded the bird at Versova Creek (Bombay) on 11.ii.1962; his specimen was taken on 1.vii.1962 and had got itself caught along the Marine Drive on a fisherman's hook while swallowing the bait (ibid. 59: 649). These two records coupled with Stuart Baker's statement in the Fauna that the bird bred in March/April led Navarro to surmise that it possibly did so on some remote rocks which are not totally submerged during high tide along the coast of Bombay. The second specimen was picked up dead by Rauf Ali (ibid. 63: 437) at Kihim, Alibag shore on 8.v.1966. From a conversation with Mr Creado on the subject we recall that his specimen was picked up on 7.vii.1972. - Ed.]

#### An interesting episode

On the morning of 17.xi.1971 at about 8.30 a.m. I happened to witness a very interesting drama of birdlife at Jamnagar. Four to five Whitebacked Vultures were sitting on the parapet of the terrace of a tall building. Out of these, one pair started copulating. When the male mounted the female, a fellow Whitebacked Vulture, sitting nearby, flew over the mounting male and dislodged him. The male mounted again and again he was dislodged. This happened thrice. On the fourth and fifth attempts a Common House Crow intervened and foiled the design of the male vulture.

Crows are rather notorious for their mischief-mongering. One can ascribe his action in this incident as his mischievousness. But what about the other Whitebacked Vulture who seemed to be intolerant of one of his kin's natural instinct?

Lalsinh M. Raol  
Manmohan Market  
Jamnagar

---

Zafar Futehally  
Editor, Newsletter for Birdwatchers  
32A, C. D. Barfiwala Road  
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